Love is in the air (But not for us... right?)
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Love is in the air (But not for us... right?)

by moregeous_dumb_dumb

Summary

"What if, what if someone showed them that it's okay? That a relationship doesn't have to ruin the friendship?"

Knox looks up at him, through his lashes and the hair that falls in his eyes, and Charlie just blinks. Slowly, very slowly, his lips quirk into a devious smile.

"Knox Overstreet, are you asking me out on a date?"

Or; Knox Overstreet has the ingenious idea of fake-dating his best friend, Charlie Dalton, in hopes it will help their smitten -but oblivious friends (Neil and Todd), realize their feelings for each other. Charlie of course jumps on board. What could go wrong, right?

Notes

Hey, hi, hello! This is my first story in the fandom, it came forth to me in a dream... well, no it didn't, but after having read almost every single story in the Charlie/Knox tag I was desperate for more, and thus this story came to be! This is a silly little thing that I wrote because I wanted to read it, and I uploaded it because I hoped y'all will like it too.

Ps; I've hidden the alternative title of this story somewhere in the first chapter. Let me know in the comments if you found it!

It’s a bad idea right? (affectionate)

The day Charlie’s life changes forever is a Tuesday. Thinking back to it nothing immediately stands out. Charlie woke up that morning around six o’clock, he went for his typical run before returning to the house he was sharing with his best friends – well, his best friends and *Cameron* the bane of Charlie’s existance, who so happened to be looking for cheap housing around the time Charlie and his friends were, but that’s a story for another time. Charlie had returned to the house, which was situated at the edge of the campus, making a smoothie to drink on his way to practice; he had exchanged rowing for soccer after two years of being in the varsity team because –

You’re too short and stocky, son, you need to put your back to it if you want to help your team.

Funny thing is his father had never made it to any of the teams' meetings. No matter how much Charlie had *put his back to it*, his father didn’t seem to care. Which, really, was a tastement to their whole relationship; Charlie tried, and tried, working himself raw, and his father asked for more without giving anything back. So, in an act less of defiance and more of finally starting to do things he wanted to do in life, Charlie had traded rowing for soccer team. He had also changed majors, dropping finance and going for English Lit with a minor in Secondary Education. If his father wasn’t going to care anyway, then at least Charlie was going to study something he was insterested in.

Returning home from practice Charlie feels his phone buzz inside the pocket of his sweats. Guessing it's probably his father - ready to yell at him some more for choosing to throw his life away - Charlie ignores it, unlocking the front door of the two-story property. It's a little after ten, and he is expecting to find it empty. Instead he hears music coming from the second floor and he frowns slightly, taking the stairs two at a time as his curiosity gets the best out of him. Paul Mccartney’s "Maybe I’m amazed" sounds from the closed door of his bedroom, and Charlie realizes who has taken refuge in his room, before throwing the door open.

“Hey, Knoxie,” he greets smiling wide as Knox nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound of Charlie’s voice.

Knox huffs, grabbing the pillow from behind his head and throwing it at Charlie’s face. It misses by a lot, crashing on Charlie’s desk lamp.It

would've probably knocked it on the floor, had Charlie's reflexes been slower, but as it is Charlie catches it before it topples over the edge.

"Would've served you right if it had fallen," Knox says, crossing his arms over his chest.

He is half-reclined on Charlie's bed, the pillows he has not used as missiles snug between his back and the headboard. Charlie chuckles under his breath, dropping his soccer duffel by the feet of the bed. When he looks back at him, Knox is giving him a funny look.

"You're wearing my sweater," he responds to Charlie's inquisitively raised eyebrows.

Charlie looks down at himself, already knowing that he is in fact wearing Knox' sweater. In his defense, it was drafty in the morning, and Charlie had found it lying on the back of his desk chair, so it was fair game.

"I guess I am," Charlie says, running a hand over his chest. The red cashmere feels incredibly soft under his palm. "I took a shower before putting it on, don't worry about it," he reassures, and Knox gives him a nod.

"Red looks good on you," he notices. Charlie knows that the smile spreading on his lips is smug.

"There hasn't been a colour invented that doesn't look good on me, Knoxious," he quips and Knox snorts, but Charlie can see the small smile he is trying to curb. "I thought you had study group with the gang?"

Knox's face instantly pinches and a long suffering groan comes out of his throat. He rubs a hand over his face, messing his fringe in the process, and Charlie wonders if he looks half as attractive when he does the same.

"That bad?" he asks, more to distract himself than actually wanting to know.

He hasn't had one of *those* thoughts in a while. But it's alright, it's okay, it's… whatever. Charlie's fine.

Knox peaks at him from between his fingers. "They were reciting Sonnet 55, alternating between verses." He is not sure what his face is doing, but it makes Knox chuckle. "Exactly."

“That’s disgustingly cute.”

“I know!”

“Let me guess, they didn’t find anything about that peculiar,” Charlie says, leaning against his desk, arms crossing over his chest.

“Of course not. Meeks was about to start banging his head against the desk.”

“They got Meeks too? He was our last standing soldier!”

“I know!” Knox sighs, runs a hand through his hair. “It’s all fun and games until the group disintegrates as a result of their pent-up sexual tension.”

Charlie blinks, shakes his head a little.

“I’m sorry, pent-up sexual tension?”

“Well, what would you call it?”

“Unresolved horniness? Thirst on overdrive?” Charlie ponders, and Knox chokes on his spit. His lashes flatter and he looks at Charlie, cheeks turning slightly pink. “You need to use that big brain of yours, Knoxie. Pent-up sexual tension is something my grandma would say.”

“Blue-balled energy sounds better to you?” Knox shoots back, and it catches Charlie so off guard that for a second he stares at him, speechless. Then his head falls back between his shoulder blades, and he barks out a laugh.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Knoxious has come out to play! That’s what I’m talking about!” Charlie praises and the heat on Knox’s face intensifies, but he looks proud of himself.

“Okay, okay, no matter what we call it, I think whatever is happening between Neil and Todd could potentially cause problems in the group,” Knox says after a minute. Charlie’s brows pull on his face.

“You really believe that?”

“It’s already hard being in the same room with them, what if this *thing* jus...keeps building? And what if one of them starts dating someone else?”

“Well, then I guess it’s been nice knowing you, Knoxious.”

There's silence for a second, as Knox seems to process his words. Mccartney is still crooning from his phone, the music of "Hey Jude" softly filling in for the absence of their voices.

"What do you mean?" Knox finally asks, and it comes out weak. Charlie claps his hands, eyes glinting with mirth.

"Well, if the group ends up disintegrating, as you so eloquently put it, I'm sticking with Perry, and we all know Todd is your best friend –"

"You're my best friend, actually," Knox cuts him off.

"Aw, Knoxious, stop, you'll make me blush."

"You're an idiot. And also, we're not gonna let the group," Knox pauses, makes a face "disintegrate," he says, as if the word personally offends him, "Are we?"

"You just went into a spiel about how the disintegration of our friend group is pretty much inevitable!"

"I did not go into a spiel! Also, I think you're having far too much fun with the word disintegration."

"It's so pompous; fits you rather well."

"Oh, shut up!"

"Feisty today, aren't you? Did you come in here just to yell at me or..?"

"I came because I couldn't stand studying with the group anymore."

"And you didn't go back to your room because...?" Charlie prompts, arching his eyebrows.

"Maybe I have an idea," Knox murmurs, his voice wavering ever so slightly. The change in his tone gives Charlie pause, his interest piqued.

"An idea?" he echoes. Knox remains silent, dropping his gaze into his lap instead of meeting Charlie's. "Will I have to guess for it or are you going to share?"

Even with his head bend, hair hiding half his face, Charlie can tell that Knox is rolling his eyes.

“Well I thought… they’re probably worried about messing up their friendship, right? That’s why they don’t take the next step.”

“Right, okay…” Charlie trails off, waiting for Knox to work through whatever it is that stops him from speaking freely. His friend draws a deep breath, plays with an errand piece of lint hanging from his cuff.

It’s stupidly endearing.

“What if, what if someone showed them that it’s okay? That a relationship doesn’t have to ruin their friendship?”

Knox looks up at him, through his lashes and the strands of hair falling in his eyes, and Charlie just blinks. Slowly, very slowly, his lips quirk into a devious smile.

“Knox Overstreet, are you asking me out on a date?”

“Is it a bad idea?”

“It’s a terrible idea!” Charlie exclaims and Knox’s expression turns mortified. “So much so that it might actually work,” Charlie adds, and Knox immediately perks up.

“You think?”

“Honestly, Knoxalicious, I have no idea. But this could be fun, for us.” It’s a testament to their friendship that Knox doesn’t even react to the newest nickname.

“Dating me would be fun?” Knox asks, quirking an eyebrow.

“Flustering you definitely will be,” Charlie quips, adding a sultry wink. As predicted Knox drops his head, but not before Charlie gets to witness his cheeks turning pink.

“Idiot,” Knox mutters, but there’s no bite behind it.

“You know you love me, *boyfriend*,” Charlie teases, and the word rolls effortlessly on his tongue.

“Oh my god, that was such a bad idea.” Knox groans. “Also, fake boyfriend, Charlie,” he corrects, giving him a serious look. Charlie’s head tilts to the left.

“C’mon, I promise I’m gonna make you swoon.”

Knox snorts.

“You don’t have a single romantic bone in your body, Dalton. I would like to see you try.”

“Is that a challenge?” Charlie demands, pushing away from his desk and stalking closer to the bed, steps deliberate and slow. Knox meets his gaze steadfastly, unwilling to back down.

“Bring it, Charlie,” Knox's tone is calm, a soft taunt lurking behind them.

“You’re gonna rue the day, Knox Overstreet,” Charlie issues his warning, leaning in closer, his eyes squinting playfully.

“Words that every boy wants to hear from their partner,” Knox fake-swoons and Charlie smiles at his antics. He stops a breath away from his bed, towering over Knox who remains sprawled out, eyes never leaving Charlie's.

And then a thought occurs to him. “Wait, won’t your actual girlfriend mind us fake dating?”

“My gir- you mean Chris?” Knox stutters, caught entirely off guard.

“Do you have a second, secret, girlfriend you’ve been keeping from us?”

A grunt falls from Knox's lips, as he rolls his eyes. “You’re impossible.”

“And you’re being avoidant,” Charlie calls him out. There's a beat of silence, during which Knox repeatedly works his jaw, like he's trying to spit something out.

“Chris is not my girlfriend,” Knox sighs heavily.

“Knoxie –”

“We’ve been on dates, but we are not *dating*." Knox says, sitting up slightly. "She won’t mind.”

“You’ll tell her though, right? I don’t fancy waking up with her standing above my bed with a knife in her hand. Cameron will be probably standing on the sideline, cheering her on,” Charlie shivers at the nightmarish idea his brain has concocted.

“Chris doesn’t care about me, Charlie. You’re safe from her wrath.”

Charlie is pretty sure that Knox is way of base. Sure, he may not know Chris all that well, and may have seen them interact only a couple of times, but Charlie knows the effect Knox has on people. Especially on girls. Specifically on *nice* girls, from *nice* families, like Chris'. Against his most basic instincts Charlie decides not to press him.

“Right, Knoxious, not that I don’t appreciate your company, but I have to get cracking on an essay that’s due in a week,” Charlie says, walking back to the desk and dropping himself on his chair.

“What's it about?”

“Stanza analysis on the first book of the Faerie Queene,” Charlie says. When he glances back at Knox, the blank look on his face brings a laugh out of him. “And you call yourself a poet…It’s a medieval epic tale about a knight who, among other things, slays a dragon to save his queen’s castle.”

“Oh,” Knox breathes, eyes brightening ever so slightly. “Sounds romantic.”

“Yeah, it’s right up your alley, lover boy.”

Knox pulls a face. “Don’t call me that.”

“Dully noted, Mr. Romeo-wannabe,” Charlie says, throwing him a military salute. Knox’s face pinches. “No? How about… Hunkster? Studmuffin? No, no I got it-- Bed-charmer!”

“Now that I think about it, lover-boy is just fine.”

“Whatever you say, you lovehound.”

“Please stop,” Knox pleads, and Charlie smirks, grabbing a pen and twirling it between his fingers. There's a beat of silence, before Knox speaks again, quieter this time. “Hey, mind if I stay here a little while longer? I don’t feel like being alone right now.”

“Sure, Knoxie,” Charlie says, swiveling around and powering up his laptop.

“I can turn the music off, if it's distracting,” Knox offers just as the opening notes of "Stop crying your heart out" floats from his phone. Charlie shakes his head, pen still twirling between his fingers.

“As long as we can avoid any and all 80s’ power ballads, we are

good."

Knox gasps, indignant. "I don't listen to power ballads."

Charlie refuses to dignify that with an answer. He hears Knox's soft huff once he realizes he is not getting anything else out of him. Charlie smiles to himself.

You sure this is a good idea, slick?

Neil's voice echoes in his mind—his sense of morality always sounds like Neil. Charlie considers it for a moment, then tosses the thought aside.

Nah, he'll be fine.

Famous last words and all that.

A week later they decide to meet after class to form a game plan. They choose to do it away from home, because even they are not that stupid. Knox suggests the café they frequented when they were trying to secretly organize Meeks' 21st birthday bash, claiming it's the last place their friends will think to look if they try to find them. Charlie knows the real reason he picks it is because Knox has a soft spot for their pumpkin pie. The café is a hole in the wall, a couple of streets away from campus. It's a cozy little thing, with plum coloured, velvet plush armchairs, and fluffy looking carpets covering the wooden floor. It smells of caramel and vanilla year-round, and the scent is so potent that it lingers on clothes for days.

Charlie pushes the door open and he feels like rolling his eyes at the jazz music filling the small space. He shakes his head, shoots a quick message to Neil that he will be running late, and walks to Knox's favorite table at the back of the shop without lifting his head.

"Nice of you to join us," Knox snarks and when Charlie finally decides to look, he realizes they're not alone; Chris Noel is seated next to his friend lips painted cherry pink, her hair curling ever so slightly at the ends.

She looks like Knox's dream-girl.

"Hello *boyfriend*," Charlie quips, dragging the chair across from Knox and dropping himself on it, before turning his eyes to Chris; "My boyfriend's girlfriend; how's life?"

“Charlie,” Knox chastises, cheeks turning pink. Chris herself doesn’t seem to mind, for she keeps beaming at Charlie, so he knows he’s done nothing wrong. “I thought we could use one more person’s input.”

“Oh, so you’ve actually told her?”

“I think the idea is brilliant!” Chris says excitedly, clapping her hands. Knox turns to her and the glaze in his eyes is soft enough to melt butter in December. Charlie allows the moment to last for a second longer, and then he slams his hand on the table, making Knox jump in his seat.

“Great, so, how are we going to convince our best friends that you want to jump my bones, Knoxie?”

“Charlie!” Knox cries out, face turning red. A high-pitched laugh comes out of Chris’ mouth, and she presses her palm over it to try and drown it out. Charlie smiles at her, widely.

“C’mon, Knoxious, we’re all adults here,” he teases, waggling his eyebrows.

“If you can’t take this seriously, then –” Knox sounds exasperated and Charlie cuts him off before he manages to talk himself out of what could in fact be a good idea.

“No, no, I’m sorry, Knox! I’m sorry, I’ll behave.”

“Trust?”

“Trust.”

“Alright,” Chris speaks up, leaning over the table and looking at them conspiratorially. “We need to show to your friends that being a couple doesn’t necessarily mean that they can’t still be friends.”

“That’s right.”

“Okay, so… how do we do that?” she wonders loudly and the two boys blink at her. “Seriously? Fine, just give me a moment to think.”

“You had a good idea, dragging her along, Knoxie,” Charlie praises with a wink and Knox’s face flushes anew.

“Right, I think I may have an idea,” Chris starts, but she has to stop when Knox’s phone goes off. The device is situated between a half-

eaten plate of pumpkin pie and a glass of water.

It's a disaster waiting to happen, really.

In his haste, to answer it Knox's hand collides with his glass, which sets it tumbling over. Water splashes everywhere, soaking the front of Chris' dress and wetting her phone. Knox's eyes widen comically, and he starts apologizing profusely, as he grabs blindly for the now spilled glass. His fingers don't wrap around it fast enough, and it ends up rolling off the table. It smashes upon contact and the people seated closest to them turn to look at them judgmentally.

"I'm so, so sorry," Knox mumbles, dabbing Chris' phone with an already wet napkin.

Charlie presses a hand over his mouth to smother a chuckle, but Chris is not as tactful, throwing her head back and laughing straight into Knox's face.

"So smooth, Knoxious," Charlie comments, because he can't stop himself. Knox is too flustered – the tips of his ears turning the kind of scarlet that poppies would be jealous of- to even glare at him.

"Chris, if-if your phone is damaged, I can buy-"

"Knox," Chris calls, grabbing at his shoulders and forcing him to look at her. "I told you already, it's all fine, alright?"

Knox freezes at her touch, and Charlie unconsciously holds his breath, expecting him to pull away; Knox is extremely iffy when it comes to physical touch, ask any of the poets and they will confirm it. In all the years Charlie has known him Knox has never appreciated even the most casual of touches even when they come from the people closest to him. The only person who gets a free pass is Pitts, maybe Tood on the rare occasion that Knox feels particularly affectionate.

And yet when Chris enters his personal space without any kind of preamble, all but hanging off him, Knox doesn't flinch away. Charlie whistles a little under his breath; Knox is seriously a goner for this girl.

"Hey," Knox mumbles, eyes impossibly wide as he stares at Chris. He sounds absolutely besotted.

"Gosh, you're so cute," Chris exclaims, giving him a little squeeze before pulling away. Charlie sees the minute Knox's brain sort circuits

because his friend's jaw goes a little slack. If only Knox knew how unwittingly charming he was, life would be so much easier.

Charlie shifts a little in his seat, clearing his throat as he grabs his coffee cup between his hands.

"I can't believe I'm the one to say this, but I think we should focus on the matter at hand?"

"Right, right, Charlie is right," Chris agrees, pushing a lock of hair behind her ear. Knox is still looking at her, the most smitten look Charlie has ever seen painted all over his face. "Have either one of you had a relationship before?"

"Define relationship," Charlie says, a smirk playing at his lips. Chris gives a little eyeroll but doesn't comment anything further.

"Right, I'll take that as a no. Knox?"

"Yes?"

"You're the more romantic out of the two of you –"

"You've known me for less than an hour and you've already decided I'm a heartless bastard, have you? Oh, how you wound me, Chris Noel!" Charlie speaks over her, because Knox looks like he is the middle of having a heart attack. He earns a surprised laugh from the girl, and his friend blinks rapidly, physically recalling himself to the conversation at hand.

"Don't pay him any mind, he is being a dick," he says, side-eyeing Charlie.

"Knoxious! Keep the kinky shit for when we're alone."

"He is not being a dick, he is just… emotionally constipated," Chris responds to Knox, as if Charlie had never interjected, and well first of all; rude. Second… she's not too much off the mark, but that doesn't mean her truth doesn't sting.

"Huh, you really do think you have me all figured out," he comments, because he can't help himself. Chris leans with her elbows on the table, resting her head in her palms. There's a wicked glint in her eyes when she looks at him.

"Mhm, you know what they say about first impressions and all that."

“That they’re definitely wrong,” Charlie counters, a questioning lilt in his voice. Chris tilts her head a little, her gaze calculating.

“Normally, I’m all about Charlie bashing, but I have to be in class in like thirty minutes,” Knox speaks up eyes dancing between the two of them, cutting off whatever response Chris was about to give. She holds their eye contact for a beat, before returning her attention to Knox.

“Alright, since you’re the romantic one, he has to be the driving force.”

“Driving force, I like that; sounds like me.”

“Oh, shut up Dalton!” Knox exasperates. Charlie snickers, lifting both hands in the universal sign of surrender. It placates Knox some, and he turns back to Chris.

“Have you thought how you’ll break it to them? Will it be a soft launch or a hard launch?”

The boys exchange a look, feeling equally lost.

“Uh, what?”

Chris rolls her eyes in earnest.

“Do you want to let them know via Instagram? Like uploading a ‘date photo’ but without showing the other’s face? Or would you like it better to outright tell them? A hard launch?”

“Hard launch,” Charlie says instantaneously, because honestly the other way sounds like too much work.

“Great, I’d also go with a hard launch, considering we are talking about your friend group. I think you should do it next week, at homecoming.”

“We are not going to that,” Knox looks like it pains him to say so. Chris gasps, eyes turning wide.

“Yes, you are, of course you are!” She exclaims. “A party is a perfect opportunity for two people to come closer. The alcohol, the music, the other couples hooking up!”

“The puking, the vandalizing school property, the STDs,” Charlie retorts, and Knox nods along.

“Okay I see your point," Chris conceeds, and then goes on to add, "But I think it’s your safest bet. You’ve been friends for what? Four years?”

“Five,” they both correct her simultaneously.

“Five years. It will be a little hard to sell it if you just try to convince them that one day you woke up and decided to start making out.”

“Alright…” Charlie says, pausing for emphasis, “But that’s what we expect Todd and Neil to do.”

“Yes, but from what Knox has already told me, Todd and Neil are already practically dating, so it’s not exactly the same thing.”

“I suppose.”

“So, we are going to homecoming?” Knox asks, pulling a small grimace as he looks at Charlie. “Meeks is gonna be thrilled.”

“Don’t think about it as going to homecoming, think of it as helping out your friends,” Chris says.

“By shamelessly lying to their faces,” Knox sighs, messing a hand through his hair.

“This was your idea, Knox,” Charlie reminds him.

“And it’s a good idea! I’m sure it’s going to work,” Chris presses.

“Fine, but can’t I feel a little bit weird for lying to two of my closest friends?”

“Oh c’mon, we are not trying to deceive them!” Charlie exclaims. “Well, we are, but we are not! You know what I mean.”

Knox sighs again.

“Right, right,” he mumbles. “Okay, I need to get to class. Chris, you coming?”

“Uh, I don’t have any classes for the next…three hours, but I should drop by the library,” Chris mumbles to herself. “Sure, yeah, I’m coming.”

“Charlie?”

“Nah, I’ll stay a while. I’ll see you at home.”

“Yeah, see ya.”

“It was nice meeting you, officially, Charlie Dalton.”

“Right back at you, Chris Noel.”

It’s a common, unassuming, Tuesday the day Charlie’s life changes forever. Nothing in particular stands out; he goes to practice, like every other Tuesday, he drinks his smoothie, and he lets his father’s call go to voice mail. But then Knox comes to him with a proposal that Charlie cannot refuse. And thus, the Double Bluff, as he will later start calling it, begins.

It took one night, one try, ayy (I'm hooked?)

Chapter Notes

> First off; thank you, thank you thank you for the love you've showed to this story! It's very much appreciated and I love all of you who have commented, liked or bookmarked it! I hope, I and by extend my story, won't disapoint you! Now before we get to the next chapter, I wanted to say that - okay, this is supposed to be a light-hearted story and it is, for the most part! But I cannot, in good conscience write a Charlie Dalton centered fic and not mention his fucked up family. Sooo, there will be some family angst, but the good thing is that it's only in flashbacks! Charlie's family won't make an appearance in present time, but the glimpses of them that we do get are important for his character arc. Alright, with all that said, and without further ado, here's chapter 2!
>
> Ps; this is supposed to be a slow-burn, but pacing has never been my strong suit.

Charlie is in high school, the first time his father makes him feel like he'll never be good enough.

"And another thing, Charles; you can't keep acting like a child anymore! You're fourteen years old, a grown up at this point! I don't want to get any more calls about you missing classes or disrupting dinner time. And another thing –"

Charlie presses his lips together, swallowing a groan. He has been listening to his father's 'another thing' for the past twenty minutes. At this point he's all but forgotten why he'd ventured into the office.

"- and you need to start applying yourself!"

Oh right, that's why!

Charlie tries to speak, pushes his nerves down, opens his mouth, but his father completely ignores him.

"I know getting good grades is not very hip, or very cool, or whatever lingo you kids use these days, but Ivy League Colleges care about good grades! And no son of mine will attend anything other than an Ivy!"

His father takes a pause, long enough to breathe and Charlie - who has worked himself up enough to be shaking in his anxiety, all but yells," I aced my mid-terms."

Father's eyes remind him of thunder as they pin him down.

“Watch your tone, boy.”

“Sorry, sir!” Charlie apologizes, clasping his hands tightly in his lap. He bounces a little on the balls of his feet, finding some kind of outlet for the nervous energy he feels. His father averts his gaze, muttering something underneath his breath and Charlie tries hard not to hear what he says. “We got the results of our mid-terms, sir! I did well, I did really really well.”

The silence which befalls his announcement is thick enough to be cut with a knife. Charlie feels his heart picking up inside his chest - a sparrow desperately flinging its wings against the bony prison. His father levels him with a look, arms crossing on top of his desk.

“You expect me to hand you your laurels, Charles?” Father's voice is so very calm. A chill runs down Charlie's spine. “You don’t get a 'bravo' for effort, that’s not how the world works. Bring me final results and then I’ll consider rewarding you.”

Charlie’s heart is still beating ferociously, so much so that the sound of it booming in his ears in nearly enough to drown his father’s voice out. Charlie clasps his hands together tighter, fingers pressing hard enough to bruise.

“You’re dismissed,” father says and there’s a hint of aversion in his voice. Charlie finds it hard to swallow. “Did you hear me, boy?”

“Yes, sir,” Charlie mumbles, eyes dropping to his shoes.

“Enunciate your words, Charles!”

“Yes, sir!” Charlie repeats himself.

His father doesn’t look pleased, but he gives him a nod, before returning his attention to the computer screen to his left. Charlie takes it as his cue to go, and he flees the room. The door falls shut behind him, but not before Charlie hears his father quietly muttering to himself. The words ‘such disappointment’ follow him around for the rest of the day.

Charlie enters the Knox's room without bothering to knock. The rest of

the poets are gathered in the living room, trying to convince Todd and Cameron to go out with them, so Charlie knows Knox is alone. His friend is on his bed, surrounded by books, a huge tome of what looks like Latin resting next to his left knee. He has a notebook clasped in his hands, soundlessly mouthing to himself. His spine is curved forward all six feet and two inches of him curled into a tight ball.

Charlie stands there for a second watching him as Knox softly rocks himself left and right to the refrain of *Hey Jude* – Charlie can hear the music coming from his air pods. He is wearing a burgundy sweater and a pair of washed out jeans; Knox's idea of comfort clothes. He is tapping a pen against the hardcover of his notepad, face pinched in concentration.

He looks tense.

Without thinking too much about it, Charlie walks into the room, dropping himself on the only spot on Knox's bed that hasn't been taken by books; a clearing by his right knee.

"Jesus…fuck, Charlie!" Knox cries, nearly jumping out of his skin. Charlie stretches on the bed. Despite his sour mood, Knox straightens his legs, giving him more space.

"Whatcha doing?" Charlie asks, making an effort to take a peek at what Knox has been staring so intently. It is in fact Latin, which Charlie happens to hate with a burning passion, so he drops back to the bed.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Knox is quite irritable, and Charlie smirks to himself; a short-tempered Knox is one of his favorite versions of Knox.

He is just so grumpy! It's hard to resist poking him with a stick to see his reaction.

"Oh, prickly," Charlie muses, earning a glare. The smirk grows on his face, as he pushes himself on his elbows. "Not a good day then?"

Knox heaves a sigh, tossing his notepad aside. "Tell me again why I want to be a lawyer?"

"Because you need to make a lot of money so that I can spend it," Charlie teases. Knox raises an eyebrow. "And your mother will probably hand your ass to you if you choose to do anything else."

“Mhmm, that’s probably the one.”

“Why are you in a tizzy fit? Can’t be only Latin.”

Knox pulls a face at his choice of words. He rubs both hands over his face, his answer coming out mumbled because of it.

“Great, now repeat yourself so I can hear you.”

Knox groans, sparing him a sideways glance.

“I sent a message to Chris, she left me on read.”

“So? She might be in class, or in the bathroom,” Charlie speculates, but Knox is already shaking his head before the first word leaves his mouth.

“For the past three hours?”

“Sure,” Charlie shrugs. Knox hides his face in his hands again. “Dude, I know I’m one of the first ones who told you to take it slow, but…” Charlie draws the pause out, waiting for Knox to look at him. Sure enough, Knox lowers his fingers a fraction. “I think she likes you.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Knox’s refusal is instantaneous. Charlie heaves a sigh and turns on his side to get a better look of his friend.

“Trust me on this, alright? I just happen to know girls better.”

“Yeah, sure you do.”

“Is that doubt I hear in your voice, young padawan?”

Knox narrows his eyes at him. “You don’t even like Star Wars,” he says, and he sounds accusing.

Charlie rolls his eyes. “Yeah, but the rest of you idiots do, so I’ve assimilated,” he says, allowing Knox to change the conversation. Now is not the right time to needle him about his love life. “Speaking of idiots, the poets are waiting for us.”

“Do we really have to go?” Knox whines, ruffling an errand hand through his hair.

“I’m afraid you know the answer to that, Knoxie.”

Knox groans, again, low in his throat, head falling into his hands. The

bow of his neck attracts Charlie's gaze, the skin fair enough to expose the faintest trace of blue veins whispering beneath the surface. He realizes he's been staring only when Knox makes another frustrated sound some time later, breaking him out of his trance like state.

A glitch in the system, nothing more. If he ignores it long enough it will go away.

Charlie blinks rapidly so, hoping it will clear his mind. He jumps off the bed, clears his throat. "Right," the words come out sounding funny, and Charlie coughs to cover it up. "I'm going downstairs. Don't take forever trying to make the bird nest you call hair to look presentable."

"I hate you," Knox calls, as Charlie starts down the hallway.

"I know you don't, Knoxious," Charlie yells back, taking the stairs to the first floor two at a time.

Charlie is trying not to stare.

Who the hell can make a dark green corduroy pants and beige sweater combo look like a stylish choice? Knox fucking Overstreet, that's who. Had Charlie shown up dressed like this the poets would have a field day cracking jokes ranging from his successful escape from St. Clare's orphanage to being a doppelgänger for the 'real' Charlie Dalton. But Knox shows up in the same outfit and he somehow looks like a disheveled PhD student moonlighting as a teaching assistant, with all the freshmen secretly lusting after him.

It's unfair.

"Am I the last one?" Knox asks, despite already knowing the answer. He fixes the sleeves of his sweater, folding them over until they reach his elbows. Charlie has to look away when Neil's finger painfully pokes him on the side. Charlie's eyes turn to his best friend, who is intensely avoiding his face.

"Todd and Richard are not coming, so yes," Neil answers Knox's question.

"They're not?" Knox frowns head tilting to the side, a couple of strands falling in his eyes.

"Todd's not feeling very well, and well *Dick* is just being his usual

stick-in-the-mud self," Charlie speaks up, earning another poke in his ribs.

"Be nice, slick," Neil admonishes, but there's a glint in his eyes that matches Charlie's smirk.

"The two of your together, at a party, the absolute horror," Pitt's comments as he comes to stand next to Knox, hands slipping into the back pockets of his dark colored jeans. Charlie and Neil exchange a look, index fingers pointing at each other, flabbergasted expressions covering their faces.

"Are they talking about us, Dalton?"

"I think they are, Neil. I think they are."

Neil presses a hand over his chest, his expression crestfallen. "Such horrid is our friends' opinion of us!" He exclaims exaggeratedly.

"I wonder what made them all regard us so."

"Alright, alright, wrap it up, Shakespear and Co," Meeks fixes them with a deadpan look. "There's a party awaiting us."

"Yeah, let's go party!" Pitts hollers, and Knox flinches at the sudden cry.

"You good, Knoxious?" Charlie asks and at the same time Neil turns his attention to Todd who's sprawled on the couch.

"You sure you don't want me to stay?" He asks, kneeling on the floor next to him. "We can order pizza and watch old Disney movies," Neil's voice is barely above a whisper, his brown eyes round and impossibly gentle.

Charlie looks at Knox, who is already staring at him, eyebrows raised. Meeks rubs a hand against his forehead, and Pitts pats him on the shoulder looking equally as mystified.

"I'll be fine, you should go have fun," Todd responds giving him a soft smile, and it's a good think that Neil has his back turned to them, because Pitts' throws his hands in the air - a physical manifestation of his exasperation. "Besides, Cameron will be here, if I need anything."

Charlie is the only one who gets to witness Neil's face scranching at the mention of their other friend, as if the idea of Cameron looking

after Todd greatly upsets him. “Okay, but if you need anything, you call me, yeah?”

Todd rolls his eyes, fondly, a smile playing on his lips. “I’ll call you, Neil. Now go, have fun,” he says, pushing at Neil’s shoulder. Neil studies him for a second longer, before jumping to his feet.

“Alright, gentlemen,” he says, his trademark charming grin gracing his face. “Who is ready to seize the night?”

“Aye, aye captain!” They all cry in unison, and they leave the house in a fit of giggles, pushing at each other’s back.

The first thing they notice upon entering the gym is that the space has been transformed into an '80s wonderland, bursting with neon lights and movie nostalgia. Posters of Molly Ringwald, John Cusack, and Matthew Broderick are lining the walls, while a life-sized cardboard cutout of Lloyd Dobler with his boombox held high above his head welcomes everyone at the entrance. A string of fairy lights loops across the ceiling like a sparkling spiderweb, casting a warm glow over the retro decor—checkered dance floor, arcade machines, and tables covered in bright geometric-patterned cloths.

Knox is shaking in his shoes, his excitment rolling off him in crashing waves. Charlie has never seen him look around a room with such unabashed love in his eyes.

“This is terrifyingly accurate to how you’ve always told me you expected prom to look like,” Pitts, who’s known Knox the longest, stage-whispers to him.

“I know!”

“Easy, my boy,” Neil says, leaning close to him in order to be heard over the loud music. “The night is still young.”

“Let’s get drunk!” Meeks suggests with a loud cry, completely ignoring Neil’s heed. Pitts hollers in agreement and sure enough he starts dragging Knox towards the drinks buffet. Meeks shakes his head as he trails after them.

“Ah youths,” Neil muses and Charlie snorts through his nose.

“You’re literally younger than all of them.”

“Knox is like fifteen days older than me,” Neil says with a shrug. “Besides, they’re young at heart.”

“And you’re not?”

“I am a thespian, my friend! I’m as old as the story requires me to be,” Neil bows with a gracious flourish of his hands and Charlie erupts in loud clapping.

“What a gift it is, to live this life at the same time as you,” Charlie keeps clapping in earnest and Neil huffs a laugh, eyes glimmering in the dim lighting.

“I think I’m gonna go mingle. You coming?”

Contrary to popular belief Charlie is not really a party person. Yes, he thrives in chaos, yes, he can make a friend out of anyone who will talk to him for longer than a minute, and sure he loves the attention he always manages to garner – especially when he gets drunk out of his ass. But Charlie actually despises the loud music, and the slew of sweaty people crowding him makes his skin prickle

Neil is the only one of his friends to whom Charlie has admitted the truth to. And bless his heart, Neil always tries to give him an out of these things, but Charlie has a reputation to maintain, and, so he never takes him up on his offer. Tonight though, Neil apparently feels like partying, because he is suggesting they join in the frenzy instead of securely standing by the sidelines. Charlie would’ve humored him, Neil doesn’t often ask things of him and when he does Charlie folds embarrassingly fast, but he and Knox are working on a tight schedule, and he cannot allow Neil to distract him.

“Nah, you go along. Imma stay here in the fringes for a while.” Neil frowns, probably considering if he should stay with him. “I’m a big boy, Perry, I’ll be alright.”

“Fine, fine, let me at least get you a drink first,” he bargains, because what is Neil Perry if not a perfect gentleman? He slips through the throngs of dancing bodies in search of alcohol, and Charlie’s protest dies in his throat.

It can’t be more than five minutes later when Neil reappears a red cup tightly clasped in his hand. He is laughing at something somebody told him on his way over, already looking more relaxed than he did when they arrived, and Charlie mentally pats himself on the back for getting the poets to attend the party, even if it is a school thing.

“You sure you don’t want to come with me?” Neil hands him the cup, his touch lingering on Charlie’s hand.

“I’ll be fine, Perry. Go,” Charlie insists, using Neil’s hold on him to push his friend away.

Neil gives Charlie one more long look, as he walks backward into the crowd, until the masses of people hide him from view. Charlie draws a deep breath, takes a swing from his drink wincing a little as the tequila assaults his tasting buds. Neil makes a mean Old Fashioned, but sometimes his hand slips a little too much while pouring the spirits. Charlie backs himself close to one of the walls of the gym; the furthest away he can stay from the dance infested people, the better. It’s the weekend, the culmination of a week full of pep-rallies, alumni fundraiser dinners and the first football game of the season, in which Yale annihilated the Princeton Tigers, so of course there's a blissful energy in the air.

Everyone is drinking, everyone is dancing, and Charlie is more than content standing alone to people-watch. He catches sight of Neil, not too far away, talking to a nameless bleach blonde, jean shorts wearing girl. Charlie has never seen her before, but Neil definitely knows her, because they’re standing close while talking.

In fact they’re standing close enough to be breathing the same air.

What the fuck is Neil doing?

“You seem awfully alone,” someone’s voice breaks into his silence, and Charlie swallows a sigh. He was having such a good time.

“Your boyfriend?” the same voice speaks, and Charlie scoffs, because the idea of him and Neil dating is preposterous. The two of them together would be an unstoppable force of nature, too much charisma and confidence for the world to handle. All of the known civilization should be thankful that Charlie and Neil were born as nothing more than platonic soulmates.

“I think you’re prettier than her,” the man says, desperately trying to appeal to him.

Charlie rolls his eyes.“I know I am.” A smug smile tugs at the corners of his lips, as Charlie finally turns around to look at the intruder. “But thanks for stating the obvious,” he adds, raising his red cup in salute.

“Right, hard to get, I recognize your game,” the stranger says, bobbing

his head. Charlie purses his lips, eyes studying the man standing before him.

He is a "cool guy" - aka the worst kind of person you want trying to hook up with you at a party. His eyebrow is pierced, and there's smudged eyeliner around his eyes, proof that he is trying a little too hard. He is taller than Charlie, but scrawnier, with a narrow waist and bony shoulders. He's tried hiding the fact by wearing an oversized black leather jacket, which he has matched with skinny dark jeans and a black shirt. The look was probably meant to be effortlessly stylish, but the blacks don't mesh well together, and the jacket is about two sizes too big to look flattering, even if he was going for an oversized-fit.

And yeah, okay fine - Charlie would probably go for him, but the abysmal flirting and the shabby excuse of a mustache littering the man's upper lip make his toes curl in disgust.

"I don't tend to play games," Charlie says, dismissively, turning back around. Neil and the blonde are not there anymore and no matter how much Charlie looks around, he cannot find them. "You need to work on your approach," he adds, taking his frustration out on the stranger, already removing himself from the conversation. He desperately needs another drink.

A hand in his forearm keeps him in place when he starts towards the drinks table.

"C'mon, kitten, don't be like that," the stranger all but purrs into his ear and Charlie's spine goes straight as he whips around to glare it him.

The man is giving him a smoldering look, and Charlie seriously questions what it is about him that attracts people like this one. Just as he fires himself up to tell the stranger off, he feels someone approach him from behind.

"Already making new friends, love?" Knox's voice has never sounded so much like music to his ears. Charlie slowly turns around, but when he looks at him, Knox is too busy seizing up the stranger, an unfamiliar look shining in his eyes.

"Well, you know me," Charlie starts, and Knox's eyes momentarily flicker down to him. Charlie offers him a thankful smile, but it barely softens Knox's stern expression. "Always attracting the peculiar kind," he adds with a casual shrug.

The stranger chokes behind him, and Charlie watches as Knox struggles to suppress a smile.

“I take it that’s your boyfriend,” the other man's voice sounds strained.

“And here I thought there was nothing between those ears of yours,” Charlie replies, not even glancing at the man over his shoulder.

He focuses on Knox instead, who is trying to maintain the ‘protective boyfriend’ stance, despite wanting to laugh. He hears shuffling behind him, a telltale sign of the man retreating, but the tension in his body melts away only after Knox finally drops the carefully constructed mask off his face.

“Can’t even leave you alone for five seconds,” Knox scolds him, but he is smiling. Charlie rolls his eyes, taking a step back to put some distance between them; Knox’s body heat's starting to make him sweat.

“You know you could’ve seriously cockblocked me with that move,” Charlie jokes, putting on an affronted look.

“You want me to go bring him back? He’s probably still lurking close by,” Knox cranes his neck, looking around. Charlie pulls at the front of his sweater to stop him.

“He might see you looking, you dingus,” Charlie hisses, the sweater still snatched between his fingers. It’s soft, and he doesn’t let go even when Knox turns his attention back to him.

“I thought I was being a cockblock; I'm only trying to fix that,” Knox says, lips twisting into a smirk that looks unfamiliar on his face. It lights his eyes with mischief.

Charlie shifts a little on the spot.

He still hasn’t let go of Knox’s sweater.

Charlie rolls his eyes, again, trying to regain control of the conversation. “Fine,” he conceds, tone carrying the slightest inkling of petulance. “Thank you, I guess, for being my knight in shining armor.”

Knox chuckles low in his throat, but then he schools his features, as he leans closer to Charlie. There’s that *look* again in his eyes, and he is so close that Charlie can see the little specs of amber in his eyes.

Uncosciously Charlie rocks on the balls of his feet.

“Hear this now; I will always come for you.” The words are spoken softly, intimately almost and they catch in Charlie's throat, stealing his breath away.

What

The

Fuck

Knox’s eye-contact is so intense that Charlie feels it wrap around his chest, squeezing the oxygen out of him. Charlie blinks, frantically chasing his scattered thoughts; he knows the words sound familiar, but Knox is too fucking close, their breaths blending together, electrically charging the air between them and –

“Did you just quote ‘The Princess Birde’ to me?” Charlie demands, his brain finally catching up, and if his voice comes out a little raspy, Knox doesn’t comment on it.

Knox manages to keep his cool for a second longer, before his face breaks into a huge goofy grin. He pulls away a little, and Charlie belatedly realizes his hand is still threaded in Knox’s sweater. He lets go, quickly shoving both hands in his jeans pockets trying to seem casual about it.

“You caught that?” Knox sounds genuinly surprised, while Charlie still tries to get a grip on himself. “You never catch my references!”

“You quoted the ‘Princess Bride’, Knoxious. Of course, I caught that! I’m not uncultured,” Charlie huffs, and Knox laughs at his indignation, a hand coming to rub the nape of his neck.

After a beat of silence, Knox asks, “You think anyone saw us?” Charlie blinks, caught off guard. “Just now, being in each other’s personal space like that? Do you think they noticed?”

Charlie blinks again, as Knox’s words start sinking in.

Oh.

Oh, that’s why he was breathing those words straight into his lips.

Yeah, that made sense.

“I think they saw us,” Charlie says, because if he's spent half his time keeping tabs on Neil, then Neil is definitely doing the same. “That was terribly smooth for someone who can literally trip on air, Knoxie,” he praises. Despite the smug little smile on his face, the tips of Knox's ears turn bright red.

“I love being in love,” Knox says, shrugging his shoulders. “Even if it’s the fake kind.”

“Right,” Charlie says, dragging the vowel, eyebrows arched. “Always the heart-stealer, deep down.”

Knox scrunches up his nose, shaking his head. “Please, just call me lover-boy and be done with it.”

Charlie pretends to ponder for a second. “Uh, no. C’mon let’s go get another drink; I need to purge that encounter from my brain.”

“As you wish,” Knox teases, his grin widening, and Charlie refrains to answer, only rolling his eyes, as he leads the way to the drinks table.

I can buy myself flowers (but like... you could buy me a bouquet as well..)

Chapter Notes

> Uuum, well I think I've gone a bit overboard with this chapter - this is too long, but I was having so much fun!! Also, I know the ending is kinda weak, but if I didn't stop there this thing would end up being 10k long.

Charlie is fifteen the first time he realizes his mom sees him as nothing more than a nuisance.

"You see, darling, I wasn't expecting you this weekend," her voice is airy, as she flickers the ash of her cigar in an ashtray. "And with Peter coming as well – No, no, Evette, not like that!" Mother cuts off herself midsentence, making both Charlie and the cook jump on the balls of their feet.

The cook looks at Charlie's mother, wooden spatula suspended midair dripping with red sauce.

"You put in the onions first and then you stir," Mother instructs, leaning over the sizzling pot – cigar and all-- for a second before quickly pulling away. "Otherwise, the onions will get soggy, and Peter hates soggy onions."

Even Charlie, with his limited knowledge of cooking, knows Mother's instruction makes no sense. Still, the cook nods, reaching for the cutting board with the chopped onions.

"Yes, madame, of course."

Mother's satisfied smile makes Charlie's stomach churn. She walks around the kitchen island, kitten-heels clicking on the tile floor – a sound like a drill in his skull.

"I don't see what Peter coming over has to do with anything," Charlie says, when it becomes obvious that Mother has forgotten they're in the middle of a conversation.

Mother startles, hand flying to her pearl necklace as she turns to look at him.

"Well, because your brother will be bringing company, of course."

Charlie tries really hard not to roll his eyes. "And?" He prompts.

"And I've prepared your room for them to sleep in."

Charlie gapes at her, mind going into static.

"But what about the guestroom?" He asks, his voice thin. Mother, now seated near one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, waves her hand dismissively.

"Oh nonsense, why would I put them in the guestroom when you're not here?"

*"But I **am** here, Mom!" Charlie snaps losing his composure. Immediately Mother's eyes sink shut, a hand coming to massage her temple.*

"Please, darling, do try to keep your voice down. My nerves are frail, and my head is killing me."

Charlie kisses his teeth, lips pressing tightly together to keep from saying anything more. Mother's 'poor-me' act stings less than her 'why do you always make me the villain' routine, but it still makes him feel like a jerk. Charlie bites the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood. "I'm sorry, Mom," he apologizes, the coppery tang burning the back of his throat.

Mother looks at him, a wan smile playing on her lips. "It's alright, baby. Now, do you think we can still book you a last-minute flight to Vermont?"

Charlie blinks, feeling like someone has set him adrift in the middle of the ocean. He tries to swallow his shock, but his throat refuses to cooperate, chocking him up instead. "I'm- I'm not going back to school today," he stutters.

Mother narrows her eyes at him. "I told you, darling; Peter is coming home for the weekend, along with some friends. There's simply not enough space."

"It's a three-story house!"

"Do not raise your voice at me, Charles!" Mother barks, and Charlie instinctively steps back.

Mother may lose her composure, but she never yells.

She never calls him Charles.

"Why do you have to be so insolent? Don't you see what you're doing to

my poor nerves?"

"I-I- I'm so-sorry –"

"All I ever do is shower you and your brother with love and you boys never appreciate it! Acting like I'm kicking you out of the house, when I beg you every other week for a visit!" Mother's shoulders shake as if she's crying, but there are no tears in her eyes.

Charlie wants to flee to his bedroom.

Charlie wants to comfort her.

His feet keep him rooted to the spot.

"You think I don't want you here? You're my baby, Charlie, of course I want you here! But this weekend is for your brother, and I cannot let you ruin it."

"B-but it's family weekend," Charlie's voice quivers uncontrollably. He blinks and there's a wetness in his eyes that he hadn't noticed. "No one is left at Welton; I can't just go back."

"Oh, Charlie, baby, you should've told me."

"I did tell you," Charlie murmurs and he wants to be angry, but all the fight has drained out of him, He feels the exhaustion, etched in his bones, and his shoulders slump.

Mother pushes up from her chair and comes to stand in front of him. She cups his cheek, thumb brushing under his eye. "Peter and his friend will be making a ruckus and you look tired. So, we'll fix up the guest bedroom on the third floor, to give you some peace and quiet. How does that sound?"

A delirious laugh bubbles into his chest, and Charlie claws at it until it dies down. He doesn't trust himself enough to speak, so he just nods.

Mother squeezes his cheek. "My darling," she coos, and the words wrap around Charlie's throat, like a noose, tight enough to choke him. "Let's go upstairs to get you settled, alright?"

Charlie leaves first thing Sunday morning and doesn't return until Easter Break.

They need a grant gesture in order to get the ball rolling in their little fable.

Charlie repeats the words in his mind, like a mantra, as he enters the kitchen. The smell of coffee and fresh bagels make his stomach grumble. He taps his hand against the frame of the entrance, gaining everyone's attention; "Good morning," he announces, winking at Neil who is the first to catch his eye. He struts around the table, dropping himself on the only empty chair -right between Tood and Knox. His shoulder brushes against Knox's and the taller boy turns his head halfway, offering him a weak smile.

Charlie mirrors it, a sudden bout of concern bubbling in his chest upon seeing how pale Knox's face looks.

"Slept well?" Neil asks, eyes curious as they keep fliting between the two boys.

"Like the dead," Charlie replies with a grin, purposefully ignoring Cameron's offended scoff from across the table. He reaches for a bread roll, tearing through it, before adding, "Thanks for asking."

Now, Charlie likes to consider himself as someone who doesn't get stunned easily, but when Knox reaches over, grabs the cherry jam jar and mutely hands it to him, without so much as looking his way, he has to take pause. He blinks, lips twitching before setting into a fond smile. Knox is too busy, pouring himself a cup of coffee, perfectly oblivious to what's going on around him, but the small gesture doesn't go unnoticed. Across from them, Neil is boring holes on the side of Charlie's head with how intensely he is staring at him. Something stirs in his chest—probably just the hangover—but Charlie pushes it aside, focusing on flashing an innocent smile at his best friend.

"Are you feeling better, Knox?" Todd asks, leaning around Charlie to get a better look at Knox, worry etched on his face. His question is met with silence, and Todd's eyes widen, glancing around the table in alarm.

"Knoxie," Pitts speaks up, always the first to take one for the team when something concerns Knox. "Are you with us? Back to the land of the living?" he continues, bringing his cup to his lips and waiting for Knox's reply before taking a sip.

Knox grunts and Pitts' lips stretch into a smile. "Thought so."

"How much did you have to drink last night?" Todd asks, eyes shifting

between the four boys who had attended the homecoming party.

“Too much,” Meeks and Charlie say simultaneously, while Knox moans into his coffee cup. Charlie feels a weird flutter in his stomach, and blindly hopes his next bite of jam and butter will make it go away.

“Aren’t you glad we didn’t join them?” Cameron turns to look at Todd, who still has the same look of silent concern drawn on his face.

“Missed the opportunity of seeing my boy showcasing his talents,” Charlie decides to come to Todd’s rescue, once again attracting everyone’s attention. He raises his eyebrows in exaggerated intrigue, prompting Todd to glance over, too. Neil’s glare falters as he starts to laugh despite himself, eyes narrowing at his best friend.

“You made that sound way too promiscuous,” Neil retorts, barely containing a grin.

Charlie smirks, feigning innocence as he raises his hands in surrender. “Sorry for talking you up.”

“What did he do? What happened?” Todd asks, his curiosity piqued.

“Sang,” Knox practically growls, heavily resting his head in the palms of his hands.

Charlie’s smirk widens as he leans toward Knox, resting a hand on his shoulder. “Thanks for the vital information, Knoxie,” he says, his tone playful yet gentle. He can’t help but notice the faint flush on Knox’s face. A strange pang tugs at Charlie, but he brushes it off with a smile.

Todd’s eyes widen. “You *sang*?”

"Wait," Cameron interjects, eyebrows furrowing. "You *sang at homecoming* ?"

“They had a karaoke machine, we ended up taking turns,” Meeks says with a casual shrug.

“And no, it wasn't at homecoming. It was at Stick’s place,” Neil explains, noticing Todd’s still-baffled expression. “We went there after the party died down.”

“Wait, *you* sang too?” Cameron’s eyebrows shoot up, his disbelief directed at Pitts, who shakes his head with a small laugh.

“Nah, Meeks did. And Knox,” Pitts says, nudging Knox with an amused grin.

Charlie pops the word “Yep” with a smirk, his gaze lingering on Knox, who looks almost painfully embarrassed.

Cameron narrows his eyes as he stares across the table, then blurts out, “Wait, you actually sang… *in front of Chris*? *Intentionally*?”

A clatter of silverware follows Cameron’s question, and everyone’s eyes shift to Knox, whose knife has slipped from his grip, clanking against the plate. He fumbles to catch them but misses and they crash on the tile floor. For a moment, Knox just stares at his hand, as if it betrayed him.

“Klutz,” Charlie calls him out, but there's an unmistaken undertone of fondness in his voice. Cameron clears his throat, still waiting for an answer.

“Chris didn’t make it to the after party; she was too tired.” Charlie adds, saving Knox from further embarrassment.

“Did you at least get to talk to her?” And Charlie knows that Todd means well, and he is only being a good friend, but he would really appreciate it if everyone could can it with the third degree about Chris.

“We talked." Knox’s answer is so laconic that it gets at least a few raised eyebrows. Charlie himself doesn’t remember seeing Knox talk to Chris, because the only thing he does remember about the damned party is Knox standing way too fucking close to him, and Knox’s breath crashing to his face and –

“So, it wasn’t a good party?” Todd asks, looking around.

“It was an awesome party,” Meeks responds, eyes smiling along with his lips.

“You only say that because you won at beer pong,” Pitts responds with a small eyeroll.

“Uh, excuse me, I inhilated the entirety of chess club at beer pong on my own, thank you very much!” Meeks defends himself.

Pitts sniggers underneath his breath. “That’s not the flex you think it is, Steven.”

“Hey!” Meeks exclaims, face getting heated. “Those nerds could drink, alright!”

“And besides it was five against one, and Meeks still won,” Neil cuts in before Pitts has a chance to speak up.

“That’s true, Ger; you know what you have to do,” Charlie says, trademark smirk playing at his lips.

“You serious?” Pitts sighs.

“As a heart attack, Pitts my boy.”

Pitts grumbles, kicking at his chair as he gets up. “But I don’t even know where it is!”

“Then you should better go find it. Chop-chop.”

“Unbelievable! He won one game against the fucking chess club, I –”

Pitts leaves the room in a storm still complaining under his breath. From the corner of his eye, Charlie sees Knox reach for the coffee pot, his empty mug still tightly held in his hand. Charlie snatches it up, before Knox gets to it. A small gruntle of surprise scraps past Knox’s lips, staring at him as if Charlie has committed the gravest of betrayals.

“You should eat a banana,” Charlie says, leaning in close, but maintaining some careful distance. Knox turns to him, the look on his face so pitiful that Charlie feels a kick in his stomach. “And no more coffee, you need to stay hydrated.”

“Char, no, don’t take it,” Knox practically begs, fingers clinging desperately around his mug.

“It’s not good for you,” Charlie says firmly.

“Please.”

Charlie is a grown up. He shouldn’t find Knox clutching to his coffee–mug like a child clinging to its favorite blanket this charming, but he does. He feels his resolve wavering, taking a blow to the core by Knox’s annoyingly long eyelashes.

So stupidly endearing.

“Here!” Pitts’ voice acts like a claw-hammer, shuttering the awkward

tension of the moment. He bursts into the kitchen slapping a white cloth on the table with flourish. “You can have it.”

Meeks lets a gleeful cry, fingers already reaching for it. But Pitts keeps his hand firmly planted over the ribbon.

“Pitts, c’mon,” Neil urges, eyes flickering between Pitts' face and his hand.

Pitts huffs. “Fine,” he grumbles, letting go and collapsing back into his chair.

Another gleeful noise escapes Meeks' throat as he reaches for the white cloth, fingers eager to get themselves on it. His face breaks into a huge grin as he unfolds the sash, hastily pulling it over his head. The words ‘World’s most proficient and valiant drinker’ glitter across his chest. “How do I look?”

“Amazing,” Charlie and Neil say in unison.

“Like a loser,” Pitts mumbles.

“You really don’t want my opinion,” Cameron adds dryly.

Knox simply groans.

“Todd?” Todd looks at Meeks, eyes big and round, as if a deer caught in headlights. Charlie doesn’t know why, but the blonde obviously doesn’t want to answer, so in true Todd Anderson fashion he does what he knows best.

“So, did you have a good time at the party?” he asks turning to Neil, and Charlie swallows a chuckle at the look that crosses over Meeks' face.

“Ugh, it could’ve been better.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it was… lacking,” Neil says, voice dropping an octave.

“It was?” Todd’s eyelashes flatter rapidly, and Charlie sees Pitts' eyes roll so hard he is afraid they might get stuck to the back of his skull forever.

“Uh-huh, found myself getting bored quite easily,” Neil says, and even Cameron pauses what he is doing to look at them.

“Oh,” Todd breathes, cheeks flushing.

“Yeah.”

Charlie presses his lips together to keep from groaning. At this point, they’re either playing dumb or just painfully oblivious—there’s no other possible explanation. Neil leans over the table, bracing himself with both hands, his gaze fixed unflinchingly on Todd. The intensity would be laughable if Todd’s face wasn’t already flushed a shade so bright it could double as a traffic light.

Charlie considers intervening, if only to put an end to the borderline ridiculous display, if only to save his still queasy stomach from any longer suffering, when in his periphery he sees Knox making another attempt at going for the coffee pot. Once again, he proves himself to be faster, grabbing the pot and keeping it out of Knox’s reach.

“Seriously, Charlie?” Knox groans, his voice a mixture of despair and irritation.

“I’m only trying to look out for you, buddy,” Charlie says, grinning. “What you need right now is to replenish your electrolytes, not another cup of joe.”

Knox pulls a face, hand going through his hair. “Who even calls it that?” He whines, eyes tired, dull and sad. Fleetingly Charlie’s resolve waivers. “Please, give it back.”

“Okay, let’s make a deal,” Charlie says, bringing the pot to the table, and setting it between his hands. Knox’s eyes zero on it. “If you eat a banana, I’ll let you have one –” Charlie holds a finger up, wanting to make it as clear as possible “One, more cup, alright?”

Knox stares at him, eyes shifting between Charlie's and for a second, he wonders if Knox will simply lunge for the pot. But then he lets a defeated sigh, hand reaching blindly for the fruit bowl. He glares at the banana, as he starts pealing it mutely, his moves slow and strained as if doing a chore.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Charlie teases, and Knox fires him a glare the banana halfway to his mouth.

So stupidly endearing.

“Do we know when’s the next party of the season?” Meeks asks, his hand running over the length of his sash.

“Hopefully a long while away, so that we don’t die from alcohol poisoning,” Neil says, eyes shifting to Knox, before falling back to Todd, smile going from teasing to soft.

“We could always plan something that won’t leave us mentally impaired for the next two-to-three working days; like a study session?”

Pitts suggestion is met by a round of loud gasps.

“Gerard! I expected this from Cameron, but not from you!” Charlie cries, mock betrayal lacing his words.

“Hey! I like to party – in moderation,” Camerons says to which Charlie rolls his eyes.

“Because what’s more funny than partying moderately, right *Dick*?”

“At least my way of partying doesn’t end up with me looking like that,” Cameron comments, head motioning toward Knox, who still looks worse for wear.

Knox glares at Cameron. He has never been known for his cutting remarks, and he’s currently severely hangover, so he cannot master a proper comeback. “You know there’s a middle ground between no fun and whatever you call party,” he says instead, taking a long sip from his coffee.

“How about we compromise,” Neil, always the voice of reason, speaks up. “We do something chill… Like a movie night?”

“That sounds nice,” Todd is quick to agree, always ready to follow Neil’s lead.

“And that’s *your* idea of fun?” Cameron says hotly, but he knows he is well outnumbered.

“Why, *Dick*, popcorn and a flick too tame for ya?” Charlie retorts, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Fine,” Cameron relents, sitting straighter in his chair. “But I choose the movie; there’s this historic theater not too far away from campus that plays old movies –”

“Oh jeez, another riveting night of watching Citizen Kane for the hundredth time,” Pitts lets a dramatic sigh.

“Hey, that movie is a classic!”

“Alright, alright, why don’t we watch Citizen Kane at Cameron’s old-people cinema, and then come back here and watch all the Chainsaw Massacre movies?” Meeks cuts in.

“That’s like nine movies!” Cameron exclaims.

“And that’s definitely one too many movies for Richie,” Charlie ribs, taunting smirk in place.

“What’s your problem, Dalton?”

Charlie is ready to retord, when he hears Knox’s voice next to him. “Be nice, Char.”

It’s the second time in less than an hour he’s called him that and for some reason it makes Charlie stop. Knox is not big on nicknames, only resorting to them when he’s too out of it, or on some special occasion. Charlie looks at him, and Knox offers a small smile over the rim of his coffee mug.

“Alright,” he gives in, “But only cuz you’re asking.”

Knox’s smile grows on his face, despite the roll of his eyes. “You sure know how to make a guy feel special,” he banters. Charlie is aware of Neil’s eyes on the side of his head, and so he makes sure to keep his on Knox’s face.

“Okay, and now that that’s settled, I appoint myself in charge of our next *next* outing,” Meeks says in a self-important manner. “In which I’ll make sure to defend my title,” he taps his sash, drawing a few chuckles.

“Oh, we’ll see about that,” Pitts retorts, the challenge evident in his voice.

The conversation goes on shifting between subjects, from Pitts and Meeks arguing about the most prolific drinker title, to which slasher franchise is better with Charlie willing to defend ‘A nightmare on Elm Street’ to his very bitter end. The morning drags on, and despite it being a Sunday one by one the occupants of the house leave the kitchen in search of something else to do, after the breakfast is over.

Charlie is about ready to go look for his bed, well after Meeks and Pitts have left for the library, but Neil’s fingers around his elbow stops him just past the threshold.

“Okay, what’s going on?” He asks pulling Charlie back, as he is about to exit the room.

“You’ll need to be more specific, Perry,” Charlie says, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet.

Neil simply stares at him, eyebrows lifting enough to get lost behind a tuft of soft brown hair. “You know what I’m talking about,” he presses, crossing his arms over his chest.

“No, I really don’t,” Charlie responds, mirroring his stance. “I need you to use your overprized vocabulary and enlighten me, young thespian.”

Neil rolls his eyes, but there’s a quirk in his lips that he cannot completely curb. “Between you and Knox,” he says, not being really helpful.

Charlie really loves his best friend, but he can be such a little shit sometimes. “Honestly Neil, use your fucking words,” he says, kissing his teeth.

“I’ve seen the looks Charlie - the lingering ones. Are we about to have a repetition of last year’s greatest hits?” Neil asks, eyebrows arching.

Chalie scrunches his nose. “First of, don’t call it that. Rude.”

“You’re avoiding the question."

Charlie clicks his tongue, his frustration barely contained. “I’m not avoiding *shit*.”

“Eloquent, but it won’t get you out of this,” Neil retorts, a bit smugly.

“I don’t know what you want from me, Neil,” Charlie knows his voice sounds petulant.

Damn Neil and his impeccable perception even after spending the previous night partying.

Damn Knox and his inability to handle his alcohol.

And damn himself, for not seeing this coming and for not making Knox agree on a backup story if either of them got cornered alone. Now, he’s scrambling, trying to come up with something convincing while his head’s still pounding.

From upstairs, the faint strains of Elvis's *Burning Love* drift down, Knox's go-to hangover playlist filling the silence between him and Neil. It grates on Charlie's nerves, almost taunting him with its irony.

"*There*, that's the look!" Neil suddenly points out. Charlie's heart skips, and he snaps his head back to his friend, startled.

"Alright, alright, stop yelling!" Charlie sighs, rubbing his face with both hands. "Sheesh… Look, I wanted to talk to Knox before telling you…"

"Talk to Knox about what? Telling me *what*, exactly?" Neil's tone turns insistent, his eyes narrowing with a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

Charlie's jaw tightens, as the edges of his patience fray. "Ease up a little, will you?" he snaps, his fists clenching briefly at his sides. The words come out harsher than he intended, and Neil's eyes widen, his expression softening in response.

Neil's hand comes up to rest gently on Charlie's shoulder. "Hey, I'm sorry," he says, his voice open and earnest. "I didn't mean to push too hard." Yet his gaze still holds that unspoken question, searching Charlie's face for answers.

"Didn't sound like it," Charlie retorts, his voice still rough, frustration bubbling under the surface. The teasing look that has been playing in Neil's eyes melts away, replaced by a growing concern.

"Charlie…" Neil trails off, his hand squeezing Charlie's shoulder in a gesture of reassurance. The warmth of the touch only seems to intensify the knot of guilt tightening in Charlie's chest. He knows he shouldn't have snapped. Lying to him is bad enough – even if it's for Neil's benefit – but taking out his frustration on him?

That's not fair.

Charlie's throat tightens as the guilt settles heavily in his stomach, making his next words stick in his throat. "I'm probably still hangover, don't -dont' worry about," he finally manages to say, after a beat.

"No, you're right, I was asking too many questions, I –"

"Neil," Charlie calling his name effectively shuts him up. Charlie pushes a smile on his face. "Something did happen last night, but… it's all too new, okay? I'm not sure I have a label for it yet, and I…"

“Something happened with you and Knox you mean?” Neil clarifies, voice gentle. Charlie nods, and Neil’s face breaks into a grin. “That’s awesome, slick! Why aren’t you more excited?”

“Because – I haven’t had the chance to talk to him yet, and I don’t know,” Charlie’s sentence trails, and wow it’s harder to lie into Neil’s face than he thought it would be.

“You think it was a one-time thing?” Neil asks, eyebrows pulling on his forehead.

“Knox is not like that,” Charlie says immediately.

Neil nods along. "I know that, but I don’t understand why else you’d be so – worried about it.”

“I don’t know, I guess I’m too lost in my head,” Charlie excuses his lack of enthusiasm.

“Well, last night was wild – maybe, a bit too much, from what I hear,” Neil’s grin returns with a force, and he slaps Charlie playfully on the shoulder. “I say, you give him some time, and then you go clear things up.”

“I think that sounds like a plan,” Charlie says, his lips mirroring Neil’s because he can’t help it; Neil’s smile had always and will always be infectious.

“Atta boy,” Neil says, giving Charlie’s shoulder another firm, playful slap. Charlie’s shoulder rolls back a bit with the impact, and he raises an eyebrow.

“You start sounding like my uncle Donald.”

“That does not strike me as a compliment.”

“It’s really not,” Charlie replies with a smirk, crossing his arms loosely.

Neil rolls his eyes, but a smile tugs at his lips. “Right – Okay, I’m gonna go run some lines for the fall play audition.”

“Lemme guess; another adaptation of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream*?”

“Close enough.” Neil chuckles, adjusting his shirt collar and leaning in as if he’s about to share a secret. “We’re keeping the Shakespeare, but kicking it up a notch—it’s a modern take on *Julius Caesar,* set during

the 2024 presidential elections."

Charlie scoffs, folding his arms tighter. "You're joking."

Neil shrugs, his face lighting up with amusement. "Nope."

"Dude, that's like-- a rip-off of a rip-off!" Charlie shakes his head, trying to hold back a laugh.

Neil just grins wider. "Yep." Neil pops the word. He pauses raising his eyebrows. "Wanna read lines with me?"

Charlie offers him a grin, throwing his arm over Neil's shoulders. "Sure, lead the way, oh great *dramaturge*!"

"That's not -you know what, I'll take it," Neil relents laughing, his footsteps echoing with Charlie's as they make their way down the hall.

They needed a grand gesture.

The words haven't stopped replaying in Charlie's mind. He's just wrapped up an impromptu soccer session after texting a few of his teammates, saying he needed to blow off some steam. Now, he climbs the front steps of the two-story house, his pulse quickening, hands shaking slightly with anticipation as he reaches for the door.

They need a grand gesture. Charlie has to be the driving force.

If this is not grand enough, Charlie doesn't know what will cut it.

The living room is buzzing with quiet activity when Charlie walks in. Steven and Gerard are hunched over the table, heads close as they carefully adjust the 3D model of the multiverse spread between them. Todd and Cameron are curled up on opposite ends of the couch, their legs tucked under them, each engrossed in a book, occasionally shifting to get more comfortable. Neil leans casually against the armrest, his body angled slightly toward Knox, who seems more alert now, though still a little slouched, nodding as he listens to Neil speak softly.

Charlie marches up to their side of the living room not giving his brain any time to second guess his decision.

Knox's fingers tap absently against his knee, while Neil's gaze flickers to Charlie, giving him a smile in acknowledgment. Knox frowns slightly, and then follows his gaze, jaw going slack when he finally

looks at Charlie.

Yeah, they never got a chance to talk about their grand gesture.

“Char?” Knox looks up at him, brown eyes wide and impossibly round.

Charlie thinks he should probably find some of Knox’s reactions cringeworthy.

Endearing, his traitorous mind corrects.

“What is happening?” He hears PItts question the room at large.

“Is Dalton giving flowers to Knox?” Cameron’s voice comes next, incredulous.

“Maybe we should leave the room,” Todd suggests, already inching away from the couch.

“Or maybe you should all shut up and mind your own business.” Charlie thinks he doesn’t thank God enough for sending Steven Meeks their way.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Pitts demands. Charlie hears a smack, and then Pitts groans in pain.

“I think Knox is broken,” Neil sounds amused, and Charlie fleetingly looks at him, long enough to wink.

“Knoxie,” Charlie prompts, taking a step forward. He is now standing between Knox’s legs, towering over him. Knox leans back slightly, forced to tilt his head all the way up to meet Charlie’s gaze. His pupils are blown wide, lips slightly parted, and for a moment, Charlie is taken aback by how convincing Knox looks.

He is definitely a better actor than Charlie gives him credit for.

Charlie mentally tucks that thought away for later, refocusing as he thrusts the bouquet forward, practically shoving it into Knox’s face.

“Are these for me?” Knox asks, voice faintly breathless, his eyes wide with what could be genuine surprise—or just really good acting.

“Well, they sure as hell aren’t for me,” Charlie mutters, though there’s a hint of something softer in his tone now. Knox’s reaction is throwing him off more than he’d like to admit.

Knox blinks, a stunned expression settling across his face. “I—I… Charlie,” he mumbles, his voice unsteady. There’s a sparkle in his eyes, a glimmer that almost looks too real, like he’s actually moved.

Almost.

Charlie has seen the way Knox’s eyes sparkle when he looks at Chris.

“Hang on, why is Charlie giving flowers to Knox?” Gerard’s voice sounds again, and Knox blinks rapidly before turning to look at their friends.

“Maybe he is apologizing for something he did?” Meeks offers.

Cameron scoffs, lowering his book to throw a look full of disbelief at his friend. “When has Charlie ever apologized for anything he’s done? Bearing flowers nonetheless!”

“One thing is for sure: I’m never giving you any flowers.”

“As if I’d ever accept a bouquet from you,” Cameron retorts, eyes narrowing into slits.

Oh, Charlie knows this look; Cameron is gearing up for a fight.

“Guys- ” Neil tries to interject, but Charlie is already too fired up to back down.

“Oh, please, you’d be so lucky to get a bouquet from me!”

“Sometimes I really think you believe you’re God’s gift to humanity, Charlie.” Cameron’s voice is thick with frustration.

Charlie chuckles, because he knows it will make the little vein on Cameron’s chin tick. Right on que the ginger narrows his eyes, jaw jutting out, vein pulsing. “If you wanna kn-”

“Char,” Knox’s voice is quite, but commanding. His hand closes around Charlie’s arm and he doesn’t know why, but it makes him immediately shut up. Their eyes lock, and it looks like Knox is trying to communicate something to him. Charlie is not sure what his friend wants.

He nods anyway.

“Did he just shut up because Knox touched him?” Todd’s voice is full of exaggerated awe. Charlie barely suppresses the urge to flip him off.

Knox keeps staring at him, and Charlie doesn't break the contact, and it's if they're both trying to figure out what the other one is thinking without speaking a word.

"Whipped," Neil stage whispers to Meeks, who chortles. Charlie glares at them, and Meeks presses a hand over his mouth to muffle any noise coming out of it, while Neil raises both hands placatingly.

Feeling sufficiently appeased, Charlie returns his attention to Knox. "You still haven't accepted the declaration of my undying love, Overstreet," he says with a cheeky smile, waggling the haphazardly made flower arrangement of daffodils, wildflowers and one lone red carnation, right in front of Knox's face.

Knox's mouth twitches, caught between mirth and confusion. For just a moment Charlie thinks he may have taken it too far. But then Knox sighs dramatically and takes the flowers from his hand. "Is this supposed to be your way of asking me out?"

Charlie's smirk only widens. "Isn't it clear enough?"

"Lacks a bit of flair, but oh well," Knox says with a small shrug.

Charlie gasps, pressing a hand over his heart. "You wound me, Knoxie."

"Wait, wait, is anyone going to explain what the hell is going on?" Cameron demands, having finally had enough.

"What does it look like it's going on?" Knox asks, before Charlie gets the chance to rope Cameron into another sparing round.

"You expect me to believe this is for real?" Cameron asks, voice dripping with skepticism.

Charlie's reply comes abrupt - a knee-jerk reaction, "Sounds like you're asking for a front row seat at our make-out sessions, Cam."

His jab barely lands before Knox, unfazed, follows with a calm, almost cold, "I don't care what you think about my relationship, Dick."

Someone breathes out an audible 'oh' under their breath, but Charlie is too busy staring at Knox to figure out who it was.

"C'mon, Knox," Cameron says, his eyebrows arching as he crosses his arms over his chest. "We *all* live together. One minute you're moping

around because of Chris, and now you're suddenly dating Dalton?" He tilts his head, lips pursed in disbelief, as if the very idea is beneath him.

A moment of silence stretches into the second, and Charlie watches as Knox works his jaw, gearing up for something. Charlie readies himself to interfere, if the need arises, but then Knox's expression shifts. His gaze softens, and a bashful smile graces his lips.

"What can I say gentlemen; I'm an ordinary boy. I've fallen in love. I didn't think such violent things could happen to ordinary people," he says a glint of exaggerated adoration shining in his eyes.

Neil snaps his fingers, an excited gleam in his eye. "Brief encounters!"

"Oh, I've seen that movie!" Todd exclaims, excited for some reason only he knows. Neil's face lights up with a proud grin.

"When did this even happen?" Pitts demands, pointing an incredulous finger at Knox and Charlie, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"At the party last night," Knox and Charlie answer simultaneously.

"But I thought last night you were trying to chat up Chris?" Todd says, frowning in confusion.

"He was," Charlie chimes in, grinning smugly. "And let's just say, Knoxie should be grateful I was there to pick up the pieces."

Knox's eyebrows shoot up, getting lost behind his bangs. "Oh, is that right?"

Charlie levels him with a mock serious look. "Absolutely, it was a total massacre! She practically laughed in your face."

"It wasn't that bad..." Knox trails off, rubbing the nape of his neck.

They're getting on murkey territory, making things up on the spot and it's the most fun thing Charlie has done in a while. He gives Knox an exaggerated eyeroll, shrugging a shoulder. "Sure, if by 'not that bad' you mean I had to spend an hour convincing you not to give up on dating forever, then yeah. Totally fine," he snarks, throwing a thumbs-up for good measure.

"That doesn't explain the flowers though," Meeks says and Pitts nods in agreement. "Or the 'undying love declaration'."

"Well," Charlie draws the word out, eyes sliding over to Knox, "When my very constructive pep-talk didn't work, I had to find other measures to dissuade him from turning celibate."

Knox's face turns beet red, "Charlie!"

Charlie's grin only widens at Knox's mortification. "What? I'm only being honest."

"No, need for that much honesty," Knox mumbles, clearly flustered.

“I still don’t trust whatever’s happening here,” Cameron says, nodding his head toward Charlie and Knox.

“You never understood love very well, Richard,” Pitts remarks, and Meeks snorts a laugh through his nose.

“C’mon guys, cut it out,” Neil says, always the first one to cut Cameron some slack.

“Yeah, guys, cut it out! It’s not Cameron’s fault that he has a personality only a mother could love,” Charlie teases, because he cannot help himself. Neil smirks, but then shoots Knox a look.

“Can you do something about him? Before Cameron resorts to physical violence?”

“As if I cannot take Mister ‘I like partying moderately’,” Charlie rolls his eyes, but for the first time in his life Cameron doesn’t rise to the bait, having already returned to his book.

“He is your best friend,” Knox reminds Neil.

“And he is your *boyfriend*,” Neil responds waggling his eyebrows.

Knox makes a face, but doesn't refuse it. “Right – okay, move along, *boyfriend,* I think our friends had enough of you for today.”

“But—I don’t want to go!”

“Don’t be a child about it, Dalton," Knox's response comes short, but there's an undercurrent of affection hiding in it. "Besides, you’ve got some groveling to do for that sorry ass bouquet.”

“Oh, I’ve got more than just groveling in mind,” Charlie says with a smirk, allowing himself to be steered towards the stairs.

He hears their friends groan at his suggestive comment, but he doesn't pay them any mind as he follows Knox.

"You are ridiculous, you know that?" Knox asks, after closing his bedroom door behind them. He leans against it with his back, as Charlie moves further into the room, taking a seat on Knox's bed.

"Ridiculously good at this you mean," Charlie says with a grin. Knox shakes his head at him, but he is still holding Charlie's bouquet in his hand. "I dare say our hard launch was a success."

"Went about as well as I thought it would," Knox agrees, pushing away from his door, and plopping down on his desk chair. "The flowers were a nice touch."

"Oh, they made you swoon, admit it," Charlie teases, a self-satisfied smirk stretching his lips thin.

"They did add some necessary drama to the scene," Knox says, going for the more diplomatic answer. He then glances at Charlie, a smirk playing at his lips. "You know, at some point you'll need to take this thing off."

He's refering to the sweater Charlie is wearing. It's the red one, again, the one he has technically 'borrowed' from Knox. The one he has 'forgotten' to return.

"This old thing?" Charlie says, fingers playing with an errand loose thread on his cuff. The sweater is fairly worn, and way too big on Charlie, falling way past his waist, reaching the mid of his thighs. "I thought it looked better on me.

"Nice try; I expect it cleaned and ironed by the end of the week."

"Or I can give it to you know," Charlie challenges, gripping the hem of the sweater and slowly beginning to peel it off.

"Keep it," Knox stops him quickly, and Charlie smiles smugly. "For now."

"Do you think it's safe for me to sneak out to my room?" Charlie asks after a beat.

"I think you should make yourself comfortable, because they're definitely keeping tabs on us," Knox says, turning around in his chair with a casual ease. He grabs a notepad from the desk, flipping it open

with a practiced flick of his wrist.

Charlie prompts himself up on his elbows, arching an eyebrow, “So, you’re just gonna study?”

“Yep,” he replies, his focus already shifting to the notepad as he taps his pen thoughtfully against his lips.

“And what am I supposed to do?” Charlie asks, voice carrying a hint of playful exasperation.

“I don’t know, entertain yourself,” Knox shrugs, his gaze still fixed on the page as he writes.

“Oh, I don’t think our relationship is ready for that , yet,” Charlie quips, crossing his legs over the ankle, and giving Knox a teasing, sidelong glance.

“One-track mind, as always,” he replies, smirking as he scribbles a few notes, the corners of his eyes crinkling with amusement.

“Well, you know me,” Charlie says with a wry smile, letting his gaze linger on Knox with a mix of affection and amusement.

“Let me finish transcribing my social justice notes, and then we can play something on the laptop,” Knox bargains, eyes never straining from the work at hand.

“Fine,” Charlie drags the word out. “But don’t take too long, because I’m already bored.”

“I just need five minutes, you adorable nuisance,” Knox huffs, but there’s no real heat behind his words. Charlie’s answering smile is blinding.

“You already can’t resist me, Overstreet.”

“Keep it up and I’ll kick you out of my room, Dalton.”

Charlie barks out a laugh, falling backwards on Knox’s bed, head pillowed in his hands.

Who knew fake dating could be this fun?

I only see him as a friend (...yeah, right)

Chapter Notes

> Hey, hi, hello!! This took a little longer to be uploaded than I had planned, but in my excuse I did just move to a new country so... Anyway! This chapter also got away from me, ending up way longer than I intended it to, but Knox had so many ideas on how to make Charlie's life difficult, and I had to indulge him!
>
> I hope you enjoy reading this, as much as I enjoyed writing it! Let me know in the comments!

Charlie is sixteen years old the first time someone calls him a slut.

It happens at the Sunday dinner table, after he comes out to his family. No one is surprised at the big revelation of his sexuality, in all honesty they don't even bat an eye. And then Peter's boyfriend – Landon decides to say;

"Calling yourself a bisexual is just an excuse to sleep around."

Charlie looks at Peter, hoping he will jump to his defense, but his brother simply pushes the food around in his plate, and says nothing. Mother catches his eye and makes a small notion with her head for Charlie to drop it. He grits his teeth, cutting his stake in even smaller pieces as he swallows the nasty words bubbling up his throat.

"I've been dating the same girl since the beginning of term," he says, because he can't just not answer. Charlie is proud that his voice remains steady.

"And what an achievement that is," Father responds coldly, and Charlie flinches as if he has just been slapped.

"Besides, we all know how much you love a good party," Landon keeps talking, an ugly sneer in his eyes. "I doubt the only thing you enjoy about it is getting drunk and dancing with your friends."

"Landon!" Peter hisses under his breath, but it's too little too late and Charlie smacks both hands on the table, eyes blazing as he looks at Landon.

"That's so rich coming from someone with an active Tinder account! Remind me again, how long have you and my brother been dating for?"

“What - That’s a lie!”

“What is a Tinder?” Father cuts in, looking bewildered.

“A lie? Please, you’ve liked the photos of at least five guys from the rowing team!”

“Charlie, that’s enough!” Mother snaps.

“Oh, I am in the wrong here?” Charlie shoots back.

“Landon is this true?” Peter asks quietly.

“No, of course not! Babe, he is lying!” Landon insists, an accusatory finger pointed at Charlie’s face. Charlie scoffs.

“Is anyone going to explain to me what a Tinder is?” Father asks again, voice only rising in frustration.

Charlie’s face mellows as he looks at his brother. “Pete, we don’t lie,” he mutters voice soft, eyes pleading.

“That’s all you do, you little piece of –”

“Don’t,” Peter cuts Landon off, glaring at the man sitting next to him.

“You believe him?” Landon’s voice is incredulous. “You know how much Charlie loves talking out of his ass.”

“Usually, yes, but about this? Landon, Charlie is underage, which means his teammates are underage.”

Mother gasps, scandalized.

“Charles, do you have proof for your accusations?” Father asks.

“I can get it, if you’d like some,” Charlie responds, already reaching for his phone.

“That won’t be necessary, Charlie,” his brother says quickly.

“Oh, I feel so tired. You boys with your yelling,” Mother moans, theatrically pressing a hand on her forehead, her voice exaggerated as if she’s rehearsing for a melodrama.

Charlie’s fists tighten beneath the table, knuckles paling as Landon chimes in with a sneer. “It’s all Charlie’s fault.”

Landon just doesn't know when to quit. Charlie's entire body stiffens. His heart pounds in his chest, a hot rush of anger shooting up his spine.

"You want me to keep talking?" Charlie asks, voice tight as he glares at Landon. His whole body feels wound up, back straight, shoulders squared as if he is getting ready for a fight.

Peter sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose, his other hand gripping his fork tightly. His expression is tense, but he doesn't raise his voice. Instead, he snaps at Landon, barely looking up from his plate. "You're on thin fucking ice, Landon." The words are laced with a quiet warning, but Peter's tone is controlled, never one to lose his composure.

"But babe- " Landon reaches for Peter, but he moves so that Landon's hand doesn't touch him.

"Don't 'babe' me," Peter cuts him off, his voice low and tired. "We'll talk about this when we get home."

Charlie can feel the pressure building in his chest, tight and suffocating. His stomach churns, his breathing quickens. They're all sitting there, ready to continue with their meal like what he said doesn't matter at all. His voice cracks, louder than he intends, desperation creeping in. "You're going back home with him?" He looks at Peter in disbelief, his hands slamming flat against the table as he leans forward, unable to contain the storm brewing inside him. "Pete, he is cheating on you!"

"That's enough, Charlie," Mother and Peter say at the same time.

Mother's voice is sharp, finally done with the theatrics and ready to take control of the conversation with the air of someone used to being obeyed. Her gaze locks onto Charlie daring him to push further. Peter's, though, is resigned almost soft, reminding Charlie of how he used to sooth him when he threw temper-tantrums as a child. It makes Charlie's heart twist with a mix of nostalgia and frustration.

Charlie blinks, his chest tight, the dull ache of betrayal spreading through him. His jaw clenches, heat rushing up his neck as he stares at his brother, searching for a flicker of the old Peter—the one who would have stood up for him, who would have fought back.

But Peter's expression stays painfully neutral.

"Really?" Charlie's voice cracks as the words spill out, tinged with disbelief and anger. He rises from his chair, shoving it back hard enough that the legs screech against the tile. The noise is sharp, jarring. "You don't defend

me when he calls me a slut-"

"Nobody called you a slut," Mother cuts in, shuddering at the slur.

"It was implied!" Charlie's voice snaps, trembling with frustration as his eyes flit between Peter and his mother. "You don't stand up for yourself when I tell you he is messaging high school students." He gestures wildly, his hands shaking with the force of his emotions, fingers curling into fists as he struggles to keep his voice from breaking. His whole body buzzes, electrified, like he's on the edge of exploding. "You're all acting like I'm in the wrong, when he has been lying in your faces for who knows how long!"

"Charles, don't you dare walk away!" Father's voice cuts through the air like a whip, but Charlie is too fired up to fear his wrath.

"Try and stop me," he shoots back, his voice low, dangerous, eyes narrowing into a defiant glare. There's no movement, no attempt to stop him.

Charlie's chest heaves as he throws one last, fiery look around the table, then storms out. His feet feel heavy, like his anger is anchoring him to the ground, but he forces himself forward, each step carrying the weight of his frustration, his isolation, his need to escape.

This time, when the door slams behind him, it's final. He doesn't come back until summer break.

The next three months of their "relationship" are some of the most stressful in Charlie's entire life. It's not just the juggling of schoolwork and faking a relationship – no, the most nerve wrecking aspect of it all is Knox who appears to be hell-bent on making everything harder.

It all begins a week into their "dating" life. Knox starts showing up to pick him from class. Every day without a miss, he is there waiting with a different flower in hand, an easy smile playing at his lips.

"You just couldn't resist one-upping me, could you?" Charlie asks, his voice dry as he glances from the flower to Knox's ever-pleased expression.

Knox chuckles, holding the flower out. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Charlie gives an exaggerated eye roll but takes the dahlia anyway, its petals soft against his fingertips. "You do remember that this is not supposed to be real, right?"

“I remember, I’m only trying to make it a bit more convincing,” he says with a shrug.

Charlie narrows his eyes, studying him for a moment. The afternoon light catches on the flecks of amber in Knox’s eyes, and there’s something infuriatingly genuine in the way he’s looking at him. Charlie feels a twist in his stomach, his pulse skipping just a little. “You’re enjoying yourself too much,” Charlie mutters.

“I told you, Char, I love being in love,” Knox's smile widens, a playful glint in his eyes.

“Even if it’s the fake kind,” Charlie finishes the rest of his sentence for him.

Knox winks, leaning in just a fraction closer. “Exactly.”

There’s another odd twist in his stomach and Charlie blames it on too much caffeine and not enough food.

Twelve days into “dating”, Knox approaches Charlie with a wide grin holding something small in his hand. They’re in the living room, practically alone, except for Todd, who is sprawled in one of the armchairs, legs hanging off the side of it, a book resting in his lap.

“Got something for you,” Knox says, vibrating with excitement, as he presents Charlie one of his own air-pods.

Charlie takes it, eyebrow quirking in silent question.

“Put it on,” Knox urges, still grinning like an idiot.

Charlie follows the instruction, slipping the air-pod in his ear. Knox taps something on his phone, and a second later, Charlie’s phone buzzes in his pocket. Music floods into his ear, and Charlie’s breath catches somewhere between his chest and his throat. He recognizes the song immediately from that musical Neil made them sit through months ago. The plot was inane, but that specific song had stuck with him, clinging on to Charlie like second skin. For weeks afterward, he’d caught himself whispering the lyrics under his breath, unable to let it go.

Charlie isn’t exactly sure what kind of expression is on his face, but whatever it is, it makes Knox smirk as he drops onto the couch beside him. There’s a comfortable thud as Knox settles in, his shoulder

brushing against Charlie's.

"I made you a playlist," Knox says, looking far too proud of himself, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

Charlie pulls the earbud out, music still playing faintly in the background. He blinks at Knox, brows furrowing in confusion. "But… you hate this song."

And it's true. Knox despises that song, so much so that he's left the room on more than one occasion just to escape Charlie's habit of humming it under his breath.

Knox shrugs. "True, but it reminds me of you, and that's like the whole point of this playlist. Couldn't really leave it out, could I?"

Something spills in Charlie's stomach, something warm and sticky and uncomfortable. It tightens into a knot, right in the center of Charlie's chest and he quickly forces it back down before it can surface. His gaze shifts away from Knox, back to the screen of his phone, pretending to focus on the playlist instead.

Before the silence gets to stretch too far, Todd's voice cuts in, reminding them that they're not alone. "Maybe I should make Neil a playlist," he says, and it sounds more like he is talking to himself than addressing them.

Knox throws Charlie a look, his eyebrows disappearing behind his bangs. Charlie's gaze softens as his eyes find Todd's form. "Maybe you should, buddy," he says gently, not wanting to scare him off. Todd glances up from his book, still looking a bit lost in his own world, but beaming.

Knox leans back on the couch, with that same self-satisfied grin, clearly pleased with himself. Charlie forces himself to ignore him, redirecting his attention to Todd, who's bouncing song ideas around for Neil's playlist. Annoyingly, no matter how hard he tries, Charlie can't push Knox's playlist out of his mind.

Charlie powers through it, because of course he does. This means nothing.

They've been dating for twenty days when Charlie returns home to find that their living room has been taken over by a blanket fort. The couches have been pushed aside, the coffee table has migrated close to

the staircase, and the armchairs are strategically placed on either side of the bookcase, while the tv-set has been taken hostage of the blanket fort.

Charlie slowly steps close to the delicate looking construction, his hand ghosting over a quilt Pitts has had for as long as Charlie has known him. There are several cloth-lines artfully inter-webbed with various sheets, blankets and quilts hanging from them. Charlie has to crouch to peek inside, and when he does his jaw drops; there must be at least three different sets of fairy lights hanging from the 'ceiling' of the blanket-fort.

"Hi," Knox says softly, suddenly appearing in front of Charlie's face. Charlie jumps, his head hitting the top of the blanket-fort. His eyes go wide when the whole thing trembles, but Knox laughs. "Don't worry, it's sturdier than it looks."

"What is going on?"

Knox gives him a long, unwavering look and Charlie feels a familiar twist in his stomach.

Must be the flu.

Charlie makes a mental note to visit the nurse's office in campus, when Knox drags him inside the makeshift fort. Charlie stumbles, and Knox steadies him, before pulling him down to sit. Only, he has miscalculated, and Charlie ends up almost sitting on his lap.

"Bit too much PDA," Knox teases, but it's gentle and warm and it makes heat bloom in Charlie's face. Charlie rearranges their seats, looking at Knox expectantly. "Well, I remembered you telling me about making pillow-forts with Neil when you had days off school, and since most of our classes got canceled for the rest of the week…" Knox let's his sentence trail, shrugging.

The campus wide class cancelation has been a first for Yale University, as the majority of faculty has been hit with a mean case of the stomach flu. All classes have been postponed, apart from varsity team activities which happens to be where Charlie was while their living room was under attack by Knox and the entire house's bedding.

Charlie's chest tightens at the thoughtfulness behind the gesture, warmth spreading beneath his skin. He doesn't know what to do with the way Knox's attention always seems to find the tender parts of him. His gaze flickers from the mess of blankets to Knox's face, trying to

process the strange mix of emotions swelling in his chest.

“This is not a pillow-fort,” he notices, because it's the only of his thoughts that he can actually voice.

“We had more blankets than pillows.”

“Did you do all this by yourself?” Charlie asks, his voice tinged with disbelief.

But before Knox gets the chance to respond, a throat clears loudly, making Charlie jump in his seat. He blinks, suddenly aware that they're in fact not alone.

“What do you think we’re doing here?” Pitts demands, eyebrows arching dramatically.

“Yeah, are we just decorative to you, Dalton?” Meeks chimes in, arms coming to cross over his chest.

Charlie sees Knox’s grin falter slightly, as he heaves a sigh. “Meeks ands Pitts helped me out. I asked them for some advice, and they got really into it. Neil and Todd decided to stay as well, to see your reaction.”

“Hey!” Meeks cries in mock exasperation, “We didn’t just help with advice! We’ve been working on this for hours!”

“This fort would’ve remained a fever dream if it weren’t for us,” Pitts adds, looking extremely proud. “Do you know how long it took us to string up all these blankets?”

“Not to mention the fairy lights!”

“We deserve to relax in the masterpiece we helped create,” Pitts announces, falling back on his elbows a satisfied smirk playing on his lips.

“Well, I’ve stopped trying to kick you out, haven’t I?” Knox retorts, the irritation shining in his voice.

Pitts opens his mouth to argue, but Neil jumps in, before he gets the chance to. “Alright, gentlemen, that’s enough. Since we are all here, and nobody is kicking out anybody, what say you we indulge in some poetry?” he suggests, eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Cameron’s not here,” Todd points out, his voice low.

“Yes, but what Cameron doesn’t know can’t hurt him,” Neil counters, lips twirling into a grin.

“Okay, you heard your captain, go grab your books!” Charlie all but cries, breaking the tension that has already started building between Neil and Todd. Both Meeks and Pitts shoot him grateful looks as they crawl out of the fort in search for their favorite poetry collection.

They reconvene five minutes later leather-bound books in hand, their spines creaking with age. Charlie finds himself sitting close to Knox, the soft glow of fairy lights casting a halo around them. As Neil begins reciting the David Thoreau passage that commences every meeting of the poets, Charlie’s eyes flicker between Knox and the soft inviting light.

Knox leans in, their shoulders brushing, and Charlie tries to ignore the way his heart flutters at the simple closeness.

They’ve been pretending to date for over a month now. It’s Halloween and the poets have decided to meet up at the party, instead of arriving together, since they’ve agreed to keep their costumes a secret until the last possible minute.The plan also gave Charlie the perfect cover to secretly choose Todd's costume.

The party is a sensory overload, with glowing orange and purple lights casting eerie shadows across the room. Cobwebs drape from the ceiling, and a fog machine spews out wisps of smoke that curl around people’s ankles. Pumpkins with carved faces flicker with candlelight on every surface their grins illuminated in a macabre dance. Ghosts made from white sheets sway gently in the breeze created by the open windows.

Charlie navigates through the throng of costumed dancers, lips curling in disgust as he feels their body heat surround him. He spots Cameron in the distance, a brown fedora on his head, a whip wrapped around his left arm. He is evidently a sight to behold - the lamest attempt of an Indiana Jones costume anyone in the world has ever seen.

Charlie scoffs before bringing the rim of his glass to his lips.

Cameron is talking to Todd who has the most obvious “I’m internally suffering” expression on his face that Charlie has ever witnessed, visible even under all the layers of make-up. At least he looks hot, in his suffering. The grey suit Charlie had practically forced on him does wonders for his ass, and the icy-blue shinny tie paired with the dark

brown wig on his head brings out the striking blue in his eyes.

Charlie gives himself a pat on the back for a job well done.

Not too far away from them Pitts is standing by the drinks table. He is tall enough to stand out in every room he enters and the regal cape he's donned only adds to it. His costume is some sort of homage to that dude from Star Wars – Charlie has honestly zero knowledge regarding those movies, but he's ended up looking like a young and sexy version of Death. It doesn't help that his cape seems to billow dramatically every time Pitts so much as takes a step.

Charlie continues scanning the room for the rest of his friends – well, one friend in particular – when he suddenly feels a tap on his shoulder. He whirls around, whiskey sloshing over the rim of his glass. The unfortunate part of this situation – Knox spotting him before Charlie did, is that Charlie is completely unprepared for this moment.

Charlie blinks.

Opens his mouth to speak, then audibly shuts it again.

There's just one thought running through his mind;

Knox's hair is blond.

Knox's hair is blond.

Knox's hair is blond, styled into a shaggy look that frames his face, and he's wearing make-up that creates pronounced dark circles under his eyes, like he hasn't had a proper night's sleep in the past century or so. He's dressed in a white button-down, the top two buttons undone, and a pair of black slacks with brown knee-high boots.

Charlie has to check to make sure he is not salivating.

"Remember how you insisted you're gonna dress up Todd as Victor Van Dort because Neil had a crush on him in sixth grade?" Knox says instead of hello, a playful edge to his voice.

"He dressed you up as Casper," Charlie chokes out, stunned.

"You and Neil might be sharing a singular brain cell."

"He dressed you up as Casper," Charlie repeats.

“I’m afraid he did.”

“Oh my God, when I get my hands on Neil he’s good as dead,” Charlie exclaims, frustration bubbling over.

“Char, he did the exact same thing you did.”

“But—that’s different!”

“How?”

“Well, *we* are dating and besides – I mean… *Casper*?”

Knox chuckles softly, “Yeah… I get it. Honestly, though I don’t think I really pull it off.”

Charlie’s gaze flickers over Knox, lingering longer than he intended. Knox's costume isn't just making him uncomfortable; it's making Charlie acutely aware of how close they are standing. Charlie’s cheeks flush a deep pink, his heart racing as he tries to focus on anything but Knox’s teasing grin. “You look… fine,” he mutters, betraying himself just a little. His chest tightens in the familiar way that seems to accompany all of his conversations with Knox nowadays. “Whatever. You’re passable.”

Knox steps closer, his eyes glinting with something teasing yet soft. “Oh, so now I’m ‘passable’? That’s the best I get?”

Charlie’s face burns even hotter, his attempt to sound annoyed now overshadowed by the blush spreading across his cheeks. He shifts uncomfortably, trying to regain his composure while Knox’s playful gaze remains fixed on him. “Don’t push it,” he finally says, rolling his eyes.

Knox takes one more step, his presence commanding yet gentle. Their chests are almost touching, and the air between them grows charged. Charlie has no idea what’s going on, but Knox is leaning forward his eyes falling shut.

“Can I keep you?” Knox’s voice is but a whisper in his ear.

Charlie’s heart pounds furiously, each beat reverberating through his entire body. The proximity sends an electrifying jolt straight to his belly. His breath hitches, his voice coming out breathy and uneven. “Figures you’d say that,” he murmurs, trying to steady himself.

Knox pulls himself away, the grin widening on his lips. “I couldn’t help myself,” he apologizes, reaching up to run a hand through his hair.

Charlie forces out a shaky laugh desperately trying to pretend his insides haven’t turned into goo.

It’s the second week of November and it’s a soccer Sunday. Charlie’s nerves are about as crispy as he likes his bacon; if they win this game, then they’ll qualify for the playoffs. If not then Charlie’s first year in the soccer varsity team will be dubbed a failure, and then he’ll definitely not be returning home for Christmas. The field buzzes with last-minute strategizing, coaches shouting instructions, and teammates huddling together to review plays. But Charlie’s focus isn’t on any of that. No, he’s too busy staring at the person in front of him.

“You can close your mouth now, Dalton,” Cameron says, an undertone of amusement coating his words.

Charlie knows he is staring, he’s probably been doing it for too long. He blinks tries to reorient himself. “What are you wearing?” He finally asks, the confusion plain in his voice.

Knox looks down at himself, then glances over his shoulder at their friends, who are standing nearby. “Letterman jackets,” he shrugs, like it’s not a big deal.

“I see that, but it doesn’t really answer my question.”

“Yes, it does.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“You asked ‘what are you wearing’, and I answered-”

“You know what I meant, Knox,” Charlie cuts him off, frustration creeping in as curiosity simmers just beneath.

Knox shifts on the balls of his feet, his playful smirk faltering just a little.

“Get it over with, Overstreet,” Meeks hollers from the sidelines.

“Yeah, you should’ve thought about getting embarrassed before pulling the nauseatingly sweet gesture you’ve already pulled,” Pitts adds with a smirk.

Charlie doesn't say anything. He just keeps staring at Knox.

"Well, you know how in high school when you're in the varsity team and you're dating someone you give them your letterman jacket?"

Charlie scoffs lightly. "That only happens in movies, but sure."

Knox rolls his eyes but grins. "Since this is college, and the same 'rules' apparently don't apply here –"

"The 'rules' you're talking about don't apply anywhere, Knoxie."

"Will you let me finish?" Knox pleads, clearly fighting to suppress a laugh.

"Please, continue." Charlie waves a hand.

"I ordered us some custom-made letterman jackets."

Charlie refrains from rolling his eyes, arching his brows, "Yes, I see that, but I don't understand why."

Knox shifts nervously from one foot to the other, his eyes darting between the jacket he is wearing and Charlie. "I know it might seem a bit extra," he says his voice softening as he continues. "But I wanted to do something special for you. To show that you I'm proud of you and that you're not just part of the team- you're part of us." His cheeks flush slightly, and he glances down, trying to hide his unease.

You are a part of us.

"Oh," Charlie's breath leaves him as if someone punched it out of him.

You are a part of us.

Knox has spoken the words so easily, so carelessly, as if they had always been on the tip of his tongue. As if he always thinks of them in association with Charlie. And what is Charlie supposed to do with that? It's not like he's spent the past how many years trying to keep his friends at arms' length, that would've been absurd – especially where it concerns Neil and Knox, but letting them all the way in? The way Knox's words suggest the poets have?

"Yours look different," Charlie says, his eyelashes fluttering as he tries to pull himself out of the whirlwind of his thoughts.

Knox's cheeks turn a rosy pink that reaches all the way up to the tips

of his ears. “Yes, because mine is different,” he admits, his voice soft and slightly nervous. “It has the same color as your jersey.” He pauses, a touch of hesitation evident in the way his fingers fidget with the edge of his jacket. “And…”

“And?” Charlie prompts, his gaze dropping to Knox’s hands, which seem to be betraying his anxiety with their restless movements.

Knox takes a deep breath, the pink tint on his face turning scarlet. “And it has your number as well.”

Charlie’s eyes widen slightly as he processes Knox’s words. “The others don’t?” He asks, his voice almost a whisper.

“The others don't,” Knox confirms, his blush now unmistakable.

Charlie stands there, completely out of his depth. The sounds around him have increased in volume, and he knows he’ll have to bid his friends goodbye soon enough. But his chest is tight, and there’s a nervous energy cursing through his body and -

“Should I prepare myself for a flash mob?” He asks, unable to stand the silence spreading between him and Knox. The sarcasm is weak, but it’s all he’s got.

Knox laughs, eyes locking into Charlie’s as he starts humming the music of ‘Can’t take my eyes off You’. “I’m only gonna break out into song if you win the game.”

Charlie rolls his eyes, pushing at his shoulder. Knox has gotten better at this, receiving little shoves from him every now and then without a warning. It’s the only time Charlie initiates contact, and it’s the furthest he will go without expressed permission. It really shouldn’t make him as giddy as it does.

“Oh, are we giving him incentives to lose now?” Neil’s voice cuts in, causing the rest of the poets to snicker.

Knox grins, but there’s something softer in his eyes, something that makes Charlie’s heart flicker in his chest. He looks away quickly, masking the rush of warmth in his face by feigning annoyance.

“You start singing, and I book the next flight to Europe, is all I’m going to say,” Charlie mutters, shoving Knox’s shoulder again, harder this time, hoping to break the tension knotting in his chest.

“Noted,” Knox shoots him a wink. “I’ll save all the -uh – vocal activities for when we are alone.”

Charlie’s throat goes dry, eyes widening impossibly so. He opens his mouth to fire back some smart remark, but the words tangle with each other, dying on the roof of his mouth. All that comes out of his parted lips is a half-choked laugh.

“Alright, let him breathe, Knox,” Neil jumps in, wrapping an arm around Charlie’s shoulders. “He’s got a game to win.”

“Right, wouldn’t want the star player to be too distracted,” Knox teases, but his gaze lingers for a beat longer than it should.

Charlie forces a grin, though it feels tight and fake. “The star player needs to get moving if he doesn’t want to miss the game,” he replies, swallowing hard. He brushes Neil’s arm off his shoulders and turns his attention back to the field, trying to shake off the lingering distraction. The murmured well-wishes from his friends fade into the background as he jogs toward the team. The weight of Knox’s gaze still lingers on his back, and for the life of him, Charlie can’t decide whether he wants it there or not.

You are a part of us.

Yeah, he is probably screwed, he knows.

It all comes to a boiling point by the end of November. Charlie has taken to discreetly avoiding Knox, especially when they’re home alone. It's his last ditch effort to keep his sanity and avoid destroying their friendship. Thankfully Knox hasn't noticed, or if he has, he hasn’t confronted Charlie about it.

Which is good.

Great, actually.

It’s an opportunity for Charlie to get ahead of himself and kill any and all thoughts of this ‘fake’ thing with Knox turning into something *more*. He’s already been down that road once, Knox’s friendship is far too precious to make it go through the ringer again. Even if Charlie is the only person who knows it’s already been through it. So, Charlie keeps his distance, spends more time than needed at the library, and takes on extra shifts at the university's radio station. Anything to keep his mind occupied. They still put on a show in front of their friends, of

course. Knox is all wide grins, and cheeky one liners, seemingly oblivious to Charlie's emotional turmoil and Charlie… well, Charlie tries not to drown in a sea of repressed feelings.

But he is fine.

He'll be fine.

This is all but a glitch in the system, and Charlie will power through it.

Then the poets decide to go watch a movie. Which should've been an innocent and tame endeavor, by all means. And yet it's the final pop that sends Charlie's carefully suppressed feelings fizzing over like a shaken soda can.

It starts innocent enough, with Knox showing up to pick him from the library, flower in hand.

Charlie eyes the lily, adjusting the strap of his messenger bag, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"What, can't a guy pick up his boyfriend from a study session anymore?" Knox replies with a teasing grin, falling into step beside him. His shoulders are relaxed, but there's an edge of sincerity in his eyes.

Charlie forces a laugh, the sound coming out a bit too strained. "How very funny you are."

Knox shrugs, the casual movement causing his coat to shift slightly. "I try."

"You haven't answered my question," Charlie prompts, kicking a stray rock out of his path.

"We are going to the movies," Knox says, but there's something in his voice that makes Charlie throw him a sideways glance.

"You could've just texted me to come to the cinema instead of going home." Charlie's steps slow slightly as he looks at Knox, trying to read his expression.

"I could've."

"But?" Charlie prompts, his voice rising just a touch as he kicks another rock, watching it skitter away.

“But… I feel like I never see you anymore,” Knox says, his voice dropping to a softer tone. Charlie feels him studying his profile.

His heart sinks a little, the weight of Knox’s words pressing down on him. “We see each other all the time,” he replies, though his voice wavers as he continues to stare straight ahead, avoiding Knox’s penetrating gaze.

Knox shakes his head. “Not like – like this. Just the two of us."

So, Knox has obviously noticed Charlie's attempts to avoid him.

“I’ve just been busy with schoolwork and the soccer team,” Charlie hurries to explain, avoiding Knox’s gaze and focusing on the gravel path ahead.

“I know,” Knox admits, cheeks slightly heating up. “I’m probably being annoying and clingy –”

“You’re not being annoying,” Charlie cuts him off, finally meeting Knox's eyes.

Knox holds his gaze for a moment too long and Charlie nearly trips on the next errand rock that ends up in his way. He covers it lamely by turning his trip into a jog, and Knox’s eyebrows quirk in amusement.

“You okay?” Knox calls, and Charlie can hear the smile in his voice.

“Just fine!” he replies, a little too fast a little too brightly, wishing the ground would open up and swallow him whole. Knox shoots him a puzzled look, sensing the weirdness but, thankfully, not pressing the issue. They reach the cinema, getting greeted by the other poets, who are already causing a ruckus.

They all immediately fall into their usual banter, and Charlie manages to relax – just a bit. It’s easier with everyone else around; the noise drowns his thoughts, and Knox, shifts his focus to Pitts and Todd’s animated conversation about the latest Star Wars sequel? Charlie isn’t certain, but whatever, at least he can finally breathe.

He, naively, thinks he’s saved from any further embarrassment and unwanted feelings once they take their seats, but hindsight can be a bitch and Charlie should know that better than anyone.

“Here you go,” Knox says, finally reappearing from the food court, dropping a bucket into Charlie’s lap. Knox is too busy, taking off his

coat and getting himself comfortable to notice the bewildered look on Charlie's face.

"What's this?" He asks, regarding the snack bucket like it's a ticking bomb. "Knox," Charlie calls, when it's obvious his friend hasn't heard him.

"Hm?"

"What's this?" Charlie repeats. Knox's eyes flicker from the bucket to Charlie's face, and his expression shifts to one of confusion.

"I got you pop-corn, mixed some peanut butter cups in there, the way you like it."

"But I didn't ask you to get me anything."

"Well, yeah, I know. I also know that eating something always helps you concentrate better."

"That's not true," Charlie protests on instict.

"Yes, it is."

"And you know that how?"

"Because – I'm your boyfriend, and you're my best friend," Knox says, looking at him like Charlie is the one who doesn't make any sense. Like he hasn't just sent Chalie's mind into overdrive.

And you know what? It's innocent, very much so. It's Knox just being Knox. But that doesn't stop Charlie's heart from pounding inside his ribcage, and it doesn't mute the little voice in his mind that's been screaming 'danger' for the past two months. Charlie offers him a smile, or the best approximation of one that he can muster, effectively ending the conversation. Knox throws him another baffled look, but the lights start to dim, and he settles in to watch the movie.

Charlie exhales quietly, sinking a little deeper into his seat. The darkened room gives him a reprieve no matter how short it may be. He keeps his eyes glued to the screen, trying to let the flashing images pull him away from the chaos in his head. They are about halfway through the movie when Knox shifts in his seat, leaning a little closer to him. Charlie shoots him a sideways glance, but before he can say anything, Knox settles into his side, his head almost resting on Charlie's shoulder.

“Look,” he whispers a second later. His breath hits the side of Charlie’s neck and it’s so hot that it makes goosebumps break out on his skin. Charlie follows Knox’s eyes and he sees Neil leaning almost entirely into Todd’s seat, hand resting on the other boy’s knee.

“You think they’re being influenced?” Charlie asks, the unspoken *by us* hovering in the air.

Knox gives a soft shake of his head, “Nah, I think this is just them being themselves.”

“Yeah, but we’re in public. Todd usually keeps things more restrained.”

Knox seems to ponder that for a minute and then his lips stretch into a grin. He is close enough that if Charlie moves his head a little they’d be cheek to cheek. From the corner of his eye Charlie sees Cameron roll his eyes at them and he can’t help a little triumphant smirk. Knox squints at this odd response, before figuring out what’s gotten Charlie so smug.

“Char, you need to let up. You can’t keep getting into pointless pissing contests with Cameron.”

“But pointless pissing contests with Cameron are so fun!”

“I know, but they’re also immature.”

“Yes, but *I’m* also immature.”

Knox chuckles. “True. But you are also my *boyfriend*, so… please? At least try.”

Charlie sighs theatrically. “Alright, alright, for you I might.”

“Jeez, Charles, what *won’t* you do to get into my pants?”

“Oh, you little --” Charlie makes a move to shove him, but Knox is quicker this time, his long fingers wrapping around his wrist before Charlie can make contact.

Charlie huffs, and tries to rip his hand away, but Knox’s hold is strong. Adding more force he yanks his hand again, but instead of freeing himself he ends up dragging Knox halfway into his seat. He falls back with a soft grunt, the upper part of Knox’s body colliding with his.

“Well, hello there,” Knox greets, teasingly, lips twisting into a smirk.

Charlie's heart skips, then slams into a rapid, unsteady rhythm. Heat flushes up his neck, breath hitching slightly. The air suddenly feels thicker between them.

Knox's smirk grows. "Have I rendered the great Charles Dalton speechless?"

He sounds way too pleased with himself, and Charlie wants to curse him into next Thursday, but up close Knox's eyes look more like honey than amber and - oh have his eyelashes always been this long?

"I have, haven't I?" Knox teases and it's smug. It makes Charlie's stomach flip for some reason.

"Oh, shut up," Charlie manages to spit out, cheeks burning. He tries to push Knox away, but it's too weak to get him to move and – oh god, has Knox's shoulders always been this broad?

"That's the best you can do?"

"Knox- just, get back to your seat!"

"Are you flustered?"

"No!" But it comes out too quick, too defensive, and the smirk on Knox's face turns devilish. He leans his head forward, his nose barely grazing the side of his face and Charlie sees galaxies exploding as his eyes sink shut.

"Yes, you're," Knox whispers the words across his skin. Charlie makes one last, valiant effort to push him away, but Knox snatches his hands, pushing them by his sides. "Hush, now," he murmurs, his voice a velvet tease. "You're making a scene, and people are trying to watch their movie."

Charlie's breath shutters. He glances around quickly, but no one seems to care, which is somehow worse – there's no distraction from the way Knox is still pressed against him, his lips so maddeningly close to Charlie's neck –

His body gives another shiver, a very obvious one, and Knox's face nearly splits in two from the grin on his face. Charlie tries to laugh, to say something, *anything* to diffuse the tension, but the words tangle up in his tongue and die in his throat. The best he can come up with is a strangled "You're insufferable."

Knox leans back, just enough to look Charlie in the eyes, a slow, knowing smile spreading across his lips. His voice drops even lower, the perfect amalgamation of mockery and gentleness. “But you like me anyway.”

Charlie’s gaze betrays him, flickering from Knox’s eyes to his lips for just a moment. It’s a brief, involuntary glance, because thankfully his brain catches on quickly. He jerks back abruptly, finally managing to free himself. Charlie sits up straight, his pulse hammering, every nerve in his body feeling alight.

Knox laughs softly, as he settles back into his seat. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Shut up,” Charlie mutters, his voice rough and uneven. His face is on fire and he knows that Knox can tell, but there’s little he can do about it. He crosses his arms, staring hard at the screen, unseeing. The movie is nothing but a blur, his mind too loud, to full of *Knox* for Charlie to even attempt to pay attention.

This can’t be happening.

Not again, not again, not again.

But it is.

Yeah, Charlie is decidedly not going to be fine.

Fuck.

You gave me your sweater, it's just polyester (well, it's cashmere, actually)

Chapter Notes

> This story was originally supposed to be ten chapters long, BUT ch 5 got so out of hand - length wise- that I had to split it into two chapters! And because I like my numbers even, I've upped the total number of chapters from 10 to 12.

Charlie is twenty years old the first time he kisses Knox Overstreet.

*They are hosting a party at their house – a pre-Christmas bash, only it's not **pre-Christmas** because both Knox and Pitts are Jewish, and Meeks is agnostic and Neil is…well, he is Neil, and so it's more like a "pre-Merry Happy Whatever" kind of event. The two-story property looks like a nineties holiday movie gone spectacularly wrong. Strings of blinking Christmas lights are slung across the walls, but only half of them work, leaving dark patches in several places. Only two out of all of the house's windows sport a fairy-light curtain, and they cast mismatched colors in the room, giving the place an oddly uneven glow.*

In the far corner of the living room a Christmas tree leans crooked on the wall beside it, as if it needs the support. It's fake – Todd profusely refused to purchase a real one- and most of its branches bend at odd angles. Tinsel drapes across the tree in sagging clumps, spills along the banister, and even dangles from the archway leading to the kitchen.

Music floats out of a Bluetooth speaker, strategically placed on top of a coffee table; "Silent Night" suddenly transitions into a bass-heavy remix of Britney Spears' "Santa, can you hear me" – and honestly, that says more about the kind of party they're throwing than words ever could. The speaker is surrounded by a garland made of red solo cups, soda cans and half-empty glasses of what can only be assumed to be Tom and Jerries – made with Meeks' super-secret spiked eggnog recipe.

Charlie leans into Knox, his voice a warm breath against his ear. "I think you've had enough," he says, grabbing the glass from his hand. Knox startles, blinking up at him with wide, unfocused eyes, as he desperately tries to hold on to the glass that Charlie has already pried away from him.

"No, no, no, give it back," he protests, fingers flexing. Charlie arches an eyebrow at his childish antics and Knox has the audacity to pout. "Char," he whines, the nickname a slurred plea.

Yeah, he has definitely had too much if he is resorting to nicknames.

Eyes pinning into his, Charlie brings the glass to his lips taking a deliberate sip, draining it in one go. “Oops.”

Knox whines, looking at him horrified “Why would you do that?” He groans, as if Charlie has gravely wronged him.

“Because you’ve had more than enough,” Charlie says, placing the now empty glass on one of the bookcase's selves that’s doing double duty as a makeshift bar. He smacks his lips together, feeling his tongue stick in his mouth. Charlie barely refrains from wrinkling his nose in distaste; how can anyone drink this concoction that Meeks calls a cocktail is beyond him.

"No, I haven’t,” Knox denies, shaking his head. He does so a little too vigorously and he ends up stumbling. He reaches one of his hands out to keep his balance and Charlie grabs him by the elbow, before he can fall. “Okay, that didn’t mean anything,” Knox mumbles, trying to recover his dignity.

“Sure, it didn’t.”

“Charlie, I’m fine,” Knox insists, the words slow and articulate. He is trying too hard to sound sober and it should be funny, but his eyes are blown wide, and his cheeks are flushed and - oh damn him, Charlie wants to kiss him senseless.

Charlie blinks, heart stuttering.

He shakes his head a little, attempting to clear his mind. But the thought lingers, like it has for months now. It forms a noose around Charlie’s neck, squeezing the breath out of his lungs, creating a knot in the middle of his chest.

“Of course you’re fine,” Charlie mutters, voice tight. His hand is still around Knox’s elbow, and he uses his hold to pull him closer, practically guiding him through the crowd. “Now, let’s get you to bed.”

“Are you propositioning me, Dalton?” Knox grins, voice dropping in his best approximation of playful sultriness.

Charlie chuckles, a forced sound coming far too loud out of his mouth, hoping the lighting in the room is dim enough to hide the blush creeping up his neck.“No, Knoxious, I’m putting you to bed, because you can’t handle your alcohol.”

“Hey!” Knox stops in his tracks, swaying slightly. “I can hold my alcohol just fine!”

They’re near the staircase, the crowd pressing in around them. They’re all wearing ugly Christmas’ sweaters as per the dress code – Neil’s idea- and most of them are highly intoxicated, laughing and swaying to the mismatched beats of the party. Charlie’s skin tingles, and he briefly wonders if his ‘party king’ reputation is worth all his discomfort.

“Knox, listen to me-” Charlie starts, but Knox does the opposite of listening. He intercepts the drink of a passing partygoer, takes a long, triumphant swig, and tosses the empty glass behind his head with a casual flick.

Knox smirks, eyes gleaming “Watcha gonna do now, Chuck?”

“First off, don’t call me that. Ew,” Charlie says, scrunching his nose. Knox shrugs carelessly. “Also, what are you trying to prove exactly, Knoxie?”

“Nothin’,” Knox replies, another careless shrug following his words.

Charlie’s eyes narrow. “You’ve been moping for weeks - weeks! ‘Leo did this’, and ‘Leo said that’, and ‘Why did he dump me out of the blue, Charlie? He was the love of my life’ –”

“I never said that last one,” Knox cuts in quickly, face heating up. He shifts awkwardly on his feet, fingers pulling at the cuffs of his sweater, fidgeting.

Knox is wearing a red sweater, cashmere. It’s not Christmasy and it’s not by any means ugly. It’s a present from his grandmother, and he has worn it religiously for most of the fall semester - honestly, Charlie’s convinced he only takes it off to sleep. He has paired it with pleated brown pants and grey shoes.

He should look like a clerkman, and yet Charlie wants to jump his bones.

Charlie swallows a groan, messes a hand through his hair. “The point is, I know a Knox who’s trying to drink someone out of his system, and as a good friend, Imma stop him.”

Knox’s head falls back between his shoulder blades, dramatically, exposing his neck. “Charlie,” he groans, frustrated, but Charlie is too busy trying not to have an aneurism as all the blood rushes to his brain; Knox’s skin is pale enough that Charlie can see the blue whisper of veins running beneath the surface.

What would happen if he just...bit Knox's jugular?

Before he can explore the insane thought any further, something cold and wet drips down the back of his neck, and Charlie nearly jumps out of his skin. He whirls around, frantic, only to find a party-person leaning sheepishly against the banister, holding an empty red solo cup. The stranger mumbles a quick apology, clearly drunk out of his mind.

Charlie swallows a litany of expletives turning back around and fixing his gaze on Knox, "C'mon Knoxie, up we go," he grumbles, wiping the back of his neck with the sleeve of his shirt – he'd first die than show up at a party wearing a sweater, he has a reputation to uphold after all.

Knox leans heavily into Charlie as they make their way up the stairs, giggling to himself. The hand that's not firmly tucked between their bodies wraps around Charlie's bicep and he starts squeezing, lips curling into a mischievous grin.

"My arm is not an anti-stress ball, Knoxious," Charlie points out. Knox stumbles but manages to stay upright despite the throngs of partygoers brushing past them. He laughs at Charlie's quip, low and raspy in his throat and Charlie's scared he might start salivating.

"Char…have I told you lately that –" Knox hiccups halfway through his sentence, giggling through it. "- that you're like, really fit?"

Charlie freezes for a second, eyelashes fluttering as he tries to process the sudden confession. Knox, oblivious as ever to the weight of his words, lets his eyes follow the party people, mumbling the lyrics to Bieber's "Mistletoe" under his breath. Charlie's heart skips several beats, but he shoves the fluttering away, focusing on getting Knox to his room.

"Yeah, yeah, you're drunk, Knox."

"M'not! Just.. festive," Knox protests, and proceeds to stumble over the top step. Charlie catches him around the waist, before he face-plants into the hallway carpet. "My hero," Knox coos, face smashed against the side of Charlie's neck.

Charlie feels his skin breaking in goosebumps all over, Knox's breath sending his heartbeat into an overdrive. He bites on his tongue, shoves down a groan and tightens his hold on Knox.

"Alright, that's enough," he manages, voice strained. "It's high time we get you to bed, before you say something you'll regret in the morning."

Knox blows some air past pursed lips. “I don’t regret the things I say.”

Charlie spares him one look, pushing the door to his bedroom open, and using his foot to kick it shut behind them. He gently pushes Knox towards the bed, and he trips over his own feet crashing down on it. Charlie watches in disbelief as Knox proceeds to battle with his duvet, managing to wrap it around his middle like a vice.

“Charlie, the bed is killing me,” Knox cries and his tone is half joke half very real frustration. “Help me!”

Charlie pinches the bridge of his nose, a heavy sigh escaping his parted lips. Knox is still struggling on his bed, and Charlie approaches him as if approaching a feral cat, one hand held out to block any errand blows. He quickly diffuses the situation, getting Knox’s too long limbs into submission and pulling the duvet off him. Knox let’s an excited yelp, falling back on the bed, arms spread wide, eyes half-lidded but glittering with something Charlie can’t quite place. He’s too out of it to keep his guard up, his usual awkwardness replaced by intoxicating, reckless charm.

“Right,” Charlie drags the word out, finding it hard to peel his eyes off Knox’s relaxed form. “I’m going to get you some water and a Tylenol, and then I’ll see you in the morning.”

But Knox is having none of it. He pushes himself up on his elbows, eyes running down Charlie’s body, teeth showing through his smirk “Charlie, provoco te ad me suavium. ”

Charlie freezes, his mind momentarily drawing a blank. “I…What?” he mutters.

Knox’s smile turns devious, and he repeats slowly, “Provoco te ad me suavium, Char.”

Charlie’s eyebrows pull, confused. “That’s…Latin, isn’t it? You know I hate Latin, Overstreet.”

Knox sighs a little. “Mhm, what a shame.”

“What did you say?” Charlie asks, his curiosity getting the best out of him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Knox teases, voice dropping lower in a joke that Charlie isn’t part of. Knox reaches a hand out, aiming for Charlie’s arm, but he loses his balance, falling back into his bed.

“You’re shit-faced, Knoxious,” Charlie chuckles. “You should get some

sleep."

"No wait –" Knox successfully grabs him this time, pulling him into the bed. It's Charlie's turn to stumble, and he unceremoniously falls into Knox's lap. "Hey, there," Knox's smile is blinding.

Charlie's face burns hotter than a furnace. He makes a move to push himself up, but Knox's hand settles on his upper back, keeping him close.

"Hey, buddy," Charlie pats him on the shoulder, and it's awkward and he wants to make a beeline for the door. But Knox is holding him there, and - fuck his life, Knox's thighs are so firm under his ass.

"Fancy seeing you here," Knox seems to be in a mood, and it makes the synapses in Charlie's brain frizzle and die.

He should move.

He should get off the bed.

He should put as much distance between him and Knox as he can.

Knox has just gotten out of a semi-serious relationship, his mind supplies trying to get control of the situation. He is on the rebound; he is drunk and vulnerable and he will regret it if anything happens.

Charlie should leave.

Charlie should –

Knox's hand slips around his neck, blunt nails scratching his nape and Charlie is too dazed to protest. The faint smell of eggnog assaults Charlie's heightened senses, his pulse pounding in his ears. Without much of a warning, Knox swoops forward placing an off-centered, sloppy kiss right at the corner of Charlie's mouth.

It's not a real kiss; too sloppy, too drunk to count as anything but a brush of lips on his skin and it still makes nebulas burst into life behind Charlie's eyelashes.

"Knox," Charlie gasps, jerking back to stare at him. His heart is going a mile a minute inside his chest, his voice coming out strangled. "What the hell-"

Knox's eyes flutter shut, a satisfied little smile ghosting on his lips, swaying where he sits. He mumbles something else in Latin, the words too slurred for Charlie to make any sense of them.

Charlie fights the panic rising in his throat. “Okay, you menace,” he huffs, rolling off the bed and out of Knox’s lap. “Time to get some sleep.”

Knox, eyes half-closed, doesn’t let go of his wrist. His grip is surprisingly firm, his voice soft as he mumbles. “You didn’t kiss me back.”

It’s accusatory, and sleepy, and Knox’s eyes are not even open so Charlie decides not to take it too seriously.

“Next time,” he says, patting Knox’s arm, as if that will soothe both of them.

“Promise?” Knox asks, cracking one bleary eye open, a mix of challenge and vulnerability. Charlie feels his heart in his throat. He swallows it down, rolls his eyes.

“Night-night, Knoxie,” he says instead of giving an actual answer.

Something flashes in Knox’s eyes – or eye, as it is, that Charlie can’t quite decipher. His grip loosens, and his hand falls limply on his side, as he seems to sink deeper into the bed.

Charlie watches him for a moment longer, heart still racing, trying not to think too hard of what just happened. His lips still tingle, the memory of Knox’s barely caressing the corner of them lingering like a ghost tattoo. He rubs both hands over his face, heaving a sigh, and then tucks Knox in, shaking his head in disbelief. When he turns to leave, he hears Knox murmuring, more Latin words softly falling from his lips.

“What are you saying?” Charlie wonders under his breath, forehead thunking lightly against the doorframe. The room remains silent, an inadequate answer to his question. “You better not remember anything in the morning, you fucker,” he whispers, finally slipping out the door.

With one last glance at the now peacefully snoring Knox, Charlie finally slips out, his heart still pounding in his chest. He heads downstairs to grab water and Tylenol—because as much of a disaster as tonight has been, Knox definitely doesn't deserve the hell that's waiting for him in the morning.

After the cinema incident, as Charlie has dubbed it, he’s taken to quite literally residing at the library. It’s finals week, and Charlie is known to applying himself when the need arises, so no one thinks it an odd behavior when he leaves for the library first thing in the morning, and he returns home well past midnight. The rest of the poets hardly have

time to notice, each buried under their own mountain of notes. So, Charlie sticks to his routine to maintain what's little left of his sanity.

But even with the distance put between them Charlie can't escape the thoughts permanently looping through his mind. The thoughts that make his chest ache, and his lungs burn like there's not enough oxygen in them. Even with the distance Charlie can't escape his feelings.

Not again.

The scrape of a chair across from him pulls at Charlie's focus. He looks up from his laptop to see Meeks taking a seat on the other side of the desk. Quirking an eyebrow, Charlie crosses his arms in front of him, leaning on them.

"Thought you were having a study station with Sticks and Spaz," he says, conversationally. "Organic chemistry, wasn't it?"

Meeks pulls a face, "They got into a fight about the properties of molecules, so…" Meeks trails, waving a dismissive hand, like the argument was ridiculous.

Charlie raises both eyebrows. "I see," he says, though he doesn't. "So, what brings you to my neck of the woods?"

"Haven't seen you in a while," Meeks says, his voice dropping into a more serious tone. "Thought it would be easier to catch you here than at home."

"Well," Charlie looks pointedly at the number of books strewn around his desk. Meeks follows his eyes, nodding along.

"Yeah, I think at this point we're all drowning in notes," Meeks says. "Pitts and Knox have taken over the living room – you know, I had no idea how many books could be needed for just one course."

Charlie's body instinctively locks at the sound of Knox's name. He twirls the pen he is still holding in his hand, taps it against the open book in front of him.

"Aha," he makes a non-comital sound.

"I bet Knox doesn't shut up about it, I know Gerard doesn't."

Charlie shrugs, but there's a lump in his throat. He tries to swallow

around it, forcing a smile. “You know Knox, he’s not usually one to complain too much about studying.”

Meeks just stares at him for a long second, studying him and Charlie struggles not to squirm in his seat. There’s a shift in the air, like Meeks is mentally locking on to something, eyes narrowing ever so slightly. His voice is deceptively casual when he asks. “Why are you avoiding him?”

Charlie curses internally, hoping his face remains casual all the while. “Avoiding who?”

“You know who. Knox,” Meeks deadpans.

“Why would I be avoiding Knox, Meeksie?” Charlie huffs, as if the idea is absurd. His hand flexes around his pen, and he twirls it between his fingers to hide it. “I’m just… studying.”

“Right,” Meeks’ voice is dry. He leans back on his chair, arms folding over his chest. “You’ve been ‘just studying’ for a week now. Practically living here.”

“It’s finals week, Meeks. Everyone’s losing their mind,” Charlie shrugs, praying that Meeks will just drop it.

Meeks doesn’t, of course. They wouldn’t be friends for as long as they’ve been if Meeks was the kind of person to not push when Charlie doesn’t budge. He tilts his head slightly, tongue peaking out the corner of his mouth as he picks his next words.

“It’s not just you spending all your time here; even when you’re home it feels like you’re dodging him as much as you can. You’re not exactly subtle.”

The tension in the pit of Charlie’s stomach, coils tight. He mirrors Meeks’ position, leaning back with his arms crossed. He adopts a lazy grin, head tilting, “Why would I be avoiding my *boyfriend?*” the last word drips with sarcasm, heavier than he meant it.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Meeks says, unblinking.

“I’m just busy, Steven,” Charlie says, his irritation getting the best out of him. “Finals week, you know how it is,” he leans forward again, his voice taut.

Meeks kisses his teeth and the knot in Charlie’s stomach tightens. “I

know I'm not Neil, Dalton, but don't take me for a fool because of it."

"Meeks I –"

"I've been your friend for too long to not recognize when you're lying outta your ass." Charlie opens his mouth to interject, but Meeks holds a hand up cutting him off. "I know something happened at the movies; it has clearly shaken you to your core, but avoiding him? That's not the solution." Meeks leans forward, voice softer but more pointed. "When he is not studying Knox is driving himself crazy wondering what he did to make you so upset with him."

Charlie's next breath shutters before it comes out his throat. Upset? Knox thinks Charlie is *upset* with him?

"I'm not upset with him," Charlie blurts out, too quickly. "That's… stupid."

Meeks raises an eyebrow, but his expression softens a little. "Yeah, I guessed as much. Told him too. But you know how Knox can be," Meeks says, rolling his eyes.

And he does, Charlie knows better than most how Knox can be, how much he can blame himself for things outside his control. The coil snaps, and Charlie's stomach swims with guilt.

"Tell me what's wrong, and I'll help you fix it."

Charlie's mind races, grasping for a way out. For one desperate moment he considers spilling his guts to Meeks, but then things could get too complicated too fast and Charlie just needs a second to breathe!

"Okay, you got me," Charlie forces a grin, "You want the truth?"

Meeks' gaze turns intrigued. "Finally."

Charlie lowers his voice, leaning in as if sharing a secret. "I'm avoiding Knox because he snores like a freight train when he's stressed."

Meeks just stares at him, unimpressed. "You're full of it."

Charlie shrugs, leaning back again. "Believe what you want."

Meeks doesn't move, doesn't even flinch. His eyes lock into Charlie's, scanning him like he is a particularly puzzling riddle. "You're scared

of something.”

Charlie’s heart skips inside his chest. “Scared?” he repeats, forcing amusement even through the panic that keeps rising inside. “Of what? Knox? Please.”

Meeks doesn’t waver. “I don’t know… Haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Well, Mr. Poirot, when you do find out, don’t forget to notify the authorities.”

“You’re shit at lying, Dalton. I will figure you out.”

“Oh, I’m shaking in the boots I’m not wearing.”

Meeks pushes his chair back, standing slowly. “This conversation is far from over, Charlie.” Meeks rests his elbows on the back of his chair, leaning forward on it. “As your friend I will overlook the fact that you just sat there and lied to me for half an hour. As Knox’s friend? You better figure your shit out, man - fast. Or else I’m telling him to dump your ass.”

And with that, Meeks turns and walks away, leaving Charlie sitting there, his heart pounding in his ears.

“So let your gaze from me

Not stray too far away,

And your sweet kindness -”

Whoever runs the universe must think Charlie’s life is a joke. It's his first night at home—finals been over for six hours, and with them, Charlie’s last excuses—and Neil calls for a poets' meeting. Not only that, but he saves Todd for last, with a grin huge enough to split his damn face in two.

“-Be not cruel to me.

And if you think it wrong

That I should love you,

Don't hold me guilty too:

Love drives me, against whose course

Strength has no force – nor Measure."

Todd's voice floats like satin, soft and smooth, his eyes growing brighter with each new word. He is not even looking at the text, his gaze straying far too often over where Neil is sitting.

"Is it finally over?" Cameron asks his tone a mixture of unease and impatience.

"It's over," Charlie confirms, for once feeling completely in sync with the redhead.

Cameron lets a loud breath. "Oh, thank God."

"Oh, come on!" Neil exclaims, shooting them a sharp look. "That was a beautiful poem choice! It's a classic!"

"And who exactly wrote that classic?" Pitts asks, with a deadpan voice that matches the mood. Charlie can't really blame him – they did all spent the past several minutes witnessing a very intimate, very uncomfortable, exchange between their two best friends.

"Uh," Neil flounders, his mouth opening and closing, clearly at a loss for once.

"Guido Cavalcanti," Charlie and Todd - the two English majors- say in unison. Todd's cheeks instantly turn into a fade shade of pink when everyone turns their attention to him.

Neil snaps his fingers. "Yeah, Guido Cavalcanti, everyone knows that!"

"Yeah, Pitts, get with the program, already!" Charlie chimes in, because it's Neil and he'll always have Neil's back. Pitts raises his eyebrows at him, incredulously and Charie shrugs his shoulders.

"That should conclude tonight's meeting, right?" Cameron asks, sitting up straighter, already half turned toward the door, clearly eager to

escape.

“Why, Cam, got anywhere better to be?” Charlie teases.

“As a matter of fact -” Cameron begins, but Pitts gasps dramatically, clutching his chest in mock horror.

“Cameron! Do you have other friends? Be honest, we are all brave enough!” Pitts plays up the theatrics, voice shaking with exaggerated emotion.

Cameron rolls his eyes, lips pursing into a thin line. “You are all children, obviously.” He dusts off some imagined lint on his jacket’s lapel. “And no, I’m not hanging out with a friend.”

A chorus of hyperbolic ‘ohs’ break out across the room, and Todd shoots a teasing glance at Neil, who’s trying and failing to suppress a smile. “Children,” Cameron mutters under his breath.

“Who’s the lucky…girl? Boy?” Neil asks, frowning slightly, as he leans forward with his elbows on his knees.

“Inanimate object?” Charlie suggests, a mischievous glint in his eyes. He taps his chin thoughtfully, and Cameron shoots him a withering glare in return.

“It’s a person that you don’t - and will not ever- know,” Cameron says haughtily, chin lifted up just enough to make his exist seem dignified. He jumps up from the couch, poem collection tightly clasped in his hand. “Gentlemen,” he says, the word sounding more sarcastic than it has the right to sound.

Charlie sits back on his armchair, stretching his legs in front of him and crossing them over the ankle. He lets his gaze wonder, and it doesn’t take too long for it to stumble on Meeks, who is already looking at him. He is sitting close to Tood, legs folded underneath his body, glasses slightly askew as they rest on top of his nose. Meeks doesn’t say anything, he just keeps watching him, pen tapping against the collection he has in his lap.

Charlie meets his gaze, forcing a smile on his lips, kinking an eyebrow. Meeks mirrors his smile, eyes never wavering and Charlie shifts a little in his seat; he hates the feeling of being studied.

“Todd,” Neil suddenly says, and Todd’s eyes snap at him, widening slightly. “We are so late!” he exclaims a hand going through his hair

messing it up.

“We are?” There’s a questioning lilt in Todd’s voice, and Neil looks at him pointedly. “Oh, we are – late, for the.. uh, thing,” Todd agrees, finally catching on.

“You are late for *the thing*?” Charlie asks, incredulity lacing his words. Neil gives him a look usually reserved for favors. “Right,” Charlie drags out. “Your *thing*.”

“You got an audition, Neil?" Meeks offers him an out, and Charlie would bet his left lung that Neil is about to drop to his knees and start praising the redhead.

“Yes!” he cries, standing up abruptly and pointing at Meeks. “An audition! We are holding auditions for the spring play and Todd…”

“Todd is clearly running lines with you,” Knox supplies, helpfully, and it’s the first time that Charlie hears his voice – apart from him reading his poem. Something stirs in his stomach, and Charlie smothers it down before it has the chance to grow.

“Yes, right!”

“Then by all means, you should get going,” Charlie says, motioning with his head towards the entrance.

Neil doesn’t need to be told twice; he covers the distance to where Todd is seating in two long strides and grabbing his arm he pulls him up. Todd manages a hurried “Bye!”, before Neil practically drags him out the door.

“So that was obviously a lie,” Pitts quips after a second.

“No, why would you say that Gerard?” Meeks deadpans. Pitts doesn’t bother with his friend’s phlegm.

“You think they’re hooking up?” he asks, eyes dancing between the left behind poets.

“I don’t think they’ve reached that level of self-awareness,” Meeks says.

“Plus, Perry would’ve told me,” Charlie adds.

The silence that follows Charlie’s words is not exactly awkward but it’s not peaceful either. Again, Charlie shifts in his seat, still too aware

of Meeks studying him from across the room.

“Well,” Pitts says after one beat too many, clapping his hands together as he stands up. “Since Neil and Todd had to… scurry off for their audition, I guess we could also call it a night.” He stretches his arms above his head, as a loud yawn threatens to tear his face at two. “You coming?”

Meeks meets his gaze, giving a little nod. “Yeah, I’m beat.”

“C’mon little guy, let’s get you to bed before you pass out on the couch,” Pitts coos as he approaches Meeks.

“Do not call me that, Gerard Pitts, unless you want to get your ass kicked.”

“Alright, alright,” Pitts relents, raising both hands in surrender. “Didn’t mean to offend you; you’re a capable and virile young man-”

“Please, stop it,” Meeks cut him off. “Stop it forever,” Pitts is already snickering underneath his breath, but he presses his lips together, bobbing his head. “Knox, Dalton,” Meeks says inkling his head towards them. “I’ll see you *both* in the morning, I hope. Now that the finals are over and all.”

“Subtle, Meeks,” Charlie’s voice is dry, and Meeks offers him an uncharacteristic grin.

“I try.”

Charlie takes far too long to respond, and Meeks is already halfway up the staircase by the time he gets both his brain and his tongue under control. Pitts lingers, glancing at Knox, eyebrows raised, as if trying to convey something unspoken.

“Everything alright?” Charlie asks, looking between the two of them.

“We’ll see in the morning,” Pitts says laconically as he too takes his exit, before Charlie can question him any further.

And just like that they’re left alone.

Charlie and Knox, in the living-room of their shared house.

The house is quiet now, with only the low hum of the heater and the faint ticking of the wall clock filling the air. The silence is thick enough to choke him, and Charlie tries to regulate his breaths, in

through the nose out through the mouth. He swallows feeling his heart in his throat.

“You were quiet tonight,” Charlie says, the silence pressing in on him too tightly. It’s the first thought that rushes to his brain, and it’s safe enough so Charlie blurts it out, turning halfway to look at Knox who is sitting on the edge of the couch to his left.

Knox's eyes, which had been studying the carpet, flicker up toward Charlie. "Was kinda busy listening to you," Knox murmurs, his voice low and steady, though there’s a tremor underneath it. "I missed your voice."

Charlie’s stomach flips at the vulnerability in Knox’s words, his throat going dry. Fuck this was supposed to be a safe topic of discussion not a prelude to some conversation Charlie doubted he’d ever be ready to handle.

“Knox I –” Charlie starts, voice cracking at his name. Charlie doesn’t know how to continue, he is far too messed up to know how to navigate this type of situation without making it more awkward for everybody involved. But before he can stumble through an other half-assed excuse, Knox shakes his head, cutting him off.

“I don’t want any excuses, Char – I didn’t stay behind for them,” Knox says quickly, his words rushing out like he’s afraid they might stick in his throat if he doesn’t get them out now.

Charlie nods. “Okay, why did you stay behind then?”

“I uh –” Knox fidgets with the cuffs of his sweater – a grey one, too large on him, falling way past his knees, making Charlie wish he could burrow in his lap. “I got you something.”

Charlie blinks. His heartbeat stumbles in his chest as Knox twists around, reaching for something behind the couch. When he straightens up, there’s a small package in his hands, wrapped in shiny, festive paper.

“Christmas present?” Charlie asks, eyeing the wrapped gift with confusion.

“Not exactly, no,” Knox shakes his head, his index tracing the edge of the wrapping paper. He draws a deep breath, and then his eyes snap up to Charlie’s finally – *finally,* it’s been days!- and he thrusts the package at him.

“What is it?”

“Open it,” Knox prompts, drawing one of his feet up on the couch, and wrapping his arms around it. Charlie stares at the gift he is holding, feeling its weight in his heart. It doesn’t jingle or shift much when he shakes it. He looks back at Knox, who is watching him closely as he squeezes it between his hands; it’s soft. “Stop abusing my present, Dalton. Just open it!” Knox says, though there’s a nervous edge to his teasing.

Charlie swallows, a flicker of a smile crossing his lips. “If it’s not for Christmas, then what’s the occasion?” he asks, making quick work with the wrapping paper.

“No occasion,” Knox says, shrugging, though his eyes don’t leave Charlie’s hands.

Charlie frowns a little but doesn’t push it. The paper falls away, and he pulls out a soft, familiar sweater—one he’s seen a hundred times. He lifts it up, his brow furrowing even more. It’s Knox’s sweater, the one Charlie had been wearing on and off since the beginning of the semester. He glances at Knox in confusion.

“That’s *your* sweater,” he says, sounding dumb to his own ears. He knows it is, but he can’t seem to process why Knox is giving it to him.

“No, that’s *your sweater*.” Knox corrects him with a small smile. From behind his back, Knox pulls out another identical sweater, but this one is newer, the color brighter, the fabric softer, and the cuffs without the familiar loose threads. "This one is mine."

Charlie stares down at the sweater in his hands, Knox’s old one. He runs his fingers over the worn fabric, feeling the faint warmth still clinging to it. He brings the neck of it close to his face, takes a not very subtle sniff and the faintest traces of Knox’s cologne hit his nose. His heart stutters inside his chest, the hairs on the nape of his neck standing up.

“I think you gave me the old one,” Charlie says quietly, his voice tight as he looks back up at Knox.

Knox nods, watching him carefully. “I did give you the old one. But it’s no accident.”

Charlie feels like he is missing something, his mind stumbling to catch up.

“You’ve taken my sweater hostage –” Knox starts, only to be interrupted almost immediately.

“You forgot it in my bedroom!”

“- you took it hostage in the beginning of the semester. I knew you’d never give it back –”

“I’d give it if you asked!”

“I have asked!” Knox exclaims, sounding indignant, but he is laughing.

“You should’ve asked harder,” Charlie grumbles, his whole face scrunching up.

“Char… You love the sweater; I love the sweater. I knew you’d never give it back, so I went and bought a new one.” Knox grins, holding up the new sweater.

“So…you’re giving me your old one…But why?” Charlie’s voice is lower now, more tentative.

“Because” Knox simply shrugs, the expression on his face unbearably tender.

And oh.

Oh.

Would you look at that? There goes Charlie’s heart picking up speed, like it’s trying to get away from him. Charlie’s eyes fall back to the sweater, and then search for Knox’ again. Back and forth, back and forth.

“It’s yours, Char,” Knox murmurs, voice dropping to a whisper. “I’ve watched you wear it all semester, and I figured… it should stay with you.”

Charlie’s throat is too tight to properly swallow, to properly breathe. His fingers keep brushing over the worn edges of the sweater as something warm blooms in his chest. Charlie bites the inside of his cheek, tries to no avail shake off the sudden swell of emotion, but his breath hitches in his throat and there’s a wetness in his eyes when he blinks.

“Knox,” the other man's name falls from his lips a little broken, a little reverent. He doesn’t say anything else, and the name lingers in the air

between them.

Charlie swallows hard, clutching the sweater in his hands, and suddenly, for the first time in what feels like ages, everything between them feels clear. Simple. Charlie nods, unable to speak, his chest so full of warmth he feels like it might burst.

And for once, Charlie doesn't need to hide behind humor or words. He just… *is*. And it's enough.

As sick as it sounds (I loved you first) I was a dick

Chapter Summary

> alright, who asked for some angst?? this is so freaking long, I know, I know, but - I couldn't stop it anywhere else than where I stopped it, because of...reasons!! So.. enjoy this monster of a chapter!

Charlie is twenty one years old when he realizes he is in love with Knox Overstreet.

It's the last day of finals, and for the first time in a week, he's returned home before midnight. To unwind, Neil has called an impromptu poets' meeting. They spend the evening drinking cheap wine, reading poetry, and passing joints between themselves—Cameron, of course, abstaining from the recreational use.

And then Charlie blinks and all of his friends have fled the scene, and he has been left alone with the one person he's been trying to avoid for the last seven days. Knox appears to be just as anxious as he feels, avoiding his eyes and fidgeting with the cuffs of his sweater.

And then.

And then.

And then Knox takes a clawhammer straight to Charlie's heart. He gifts him the sweater, the red one, his grandma's present. That familiar, worn thing he's borrowed a hundred times, Knox's warmth still clinging to it.

"It's yours, Char," he whispers, cheeks tainted red and his voice so soft that it barely makes it to Charlie's ears. "I've watched you wear it all semester, and I figured – it should stay with you."

Charlie's heart slams against his ribcage, as if desperate to climb out of his chest and embed itself into Knox's. And Charlie wants to let it, he wants to reach for a knife carve his damn chest open, tear through sinus and flesh and bone until he gets to the flimsily beating organ. He wants to rip it out of its cage and offer it up, trembling, in Knox's hands, begging him to accept it.

Please. Take it. It's yours anyway.

The force of it terrifies him. This feeling—this overwhelming, uncontrollable feeling that threatens to consume him whole.

Because Charlie has never been particularly good with handling his feelings, much less with expressing them, and now they are getting so big, so out of hand that he's scared they're going to grow roots and the roots will wind through his internal organs like vines, ready to choke him from inside out.

"Knox," the name falls from his lips, a little broken, a little reverent and it hangs in the air between them, thick with all the things he can't say, all the words trapped in his throat. Knox just stares at him, and Charlie doubts that either one of them know what to do next. He wants to speak, to reach out, to do anything, but the fear keeps him rooted to the spot. He's drowning in his own emotions, scared that if he lets them out, they'll consume him—and there will be nothing left.

They say nothing in the end, choosing to retreat to their respective bedrooms without any partying words. Their gazes linger in the dim light, and Knox's fingers twitch as if he might reach for him. But he doesn't. Charlie doesn't either.

He is the first to turn away, slipping quietly inside his bedroom, the sound of the door clicking shut behind him reverberating in the silence. He leans back against it, his head resting against the cool wood, exhaling shakily as the weight of the moment settles over him. A second later he hears the telltale shuffle of Knox's feet taking him to his own bedroom, and he can finally breathe.

Charlie swallows, past the lump in throat, and he draws a deep breath, despite the vines nesting in his lungs. He allows his eyes to fall shut and he slowly slides down along the length of the door, collapsing in on himself until he's sitting on the floor with his knees pulled up to his chest. The sweater—Knox's sweater—rests loosely in his lap, and without thinking, Charlie pulls it closer, folding it over his knees.

He buries his face in the soft fabric, his nose pressing into the worn cotton, and he breathes in. It still smells faintly of Knox—something warm and familiar. It's comforting and agonizing all at once.

He doesn't know how long he stays there like that, curled into himself, holding the sweater like a safety blanket. The room had already been dark when he first stumbled inside, and it's still dark when he finally pulls himself up, limbs stiff from sitting for so long. He moves like he's sleepwalking, dragging himself toward the adjoining bathroom. His and

Todd's rooms are the only ones with ensuites—they had claimed them early, back when they first moved in—and now the convenience feels like a small mercy.

He strips off his clothes, letting them fall in a crumpled heap on the tiled floor, and steps into the running water. The scalding water does little to make the ache in his chest go away. It helps with some of the knots on his back and on his shoulders, but the biggest one is residing front and center in his chest and no amount of water will lessen it. It's a dull, relentless pressure, like something is pressing down on him from the inside. It refuses to budge. Charlie presses a hand on his sternum, as if he could physically untangle it, but the ache lingers, deep and stubborn.

Still, Charlie takes his time in the shower, standing under the water for what feels like forever. He briefly contemplates whether drowning in there is a better fate than facing whatever is happening between himself and Knox. There's a certain stillness, a quiet finality, in the idea that almost appeals to him.

But Charlie is too much of a worrier to put any actual thought in it – what would happen to Neil if he kicks the backet? To Meeks? To Todd? Hell, what would happen to Cameron? – and so he lets the thought float away. No, drowning is not a realistic option for him.

Charlie stands under the spray until the water runs cold. He sluggishly dries himself, skipping his usual nighttime routine, and slips on a pair of over-worn shorts. Somehow Knox's sweater ends up back into his hands, and Charlie pulls it over his head without a second thought. The sweater falls all the way down to the middle of his thighs, his fingers almost disappearing in the sleeves, but Charlie's heart swells at the softness and his next breath comes almost painlessly.

He kicks back his comforter, and gets into bed, fingers already tapping on his phone's screen. His head has just hit the pillow when the opening notes of the first song on Knox's playlist fill his bedroom and Charlie lets a content sigh, burrowing his face deeper into his pillow. He is half-asleep when he hears the soft tap on his bedroom's door. It's some time later, about forty-or-so minutes according to the songs on his playlist. Charlie rubs the sleep from his eyes, just as the door creaks open, the person on the other side of it clearly done waiting for an answer.

"My mother called," Knox's voice sounds strained. Charlie can't really see him, the room is properly dark now, but he'd safely bet that Knox is pressing his hands together, standing gingerly just past the threshold of his bedroom.

It's just three words, but they fill the air between them, heavy and unsettling. The fatigue that had momentarily lulled Charlie into half-sleep evaporates, leaving him wide awake, heart pounding with a mix of concern and confusion.

"A good call or a bad call?" he asks, pushing himself on his elbows. his voice carefully casual to mask the sudden spike of worry. His body is tense, waiting for the answer.

Knox chuckles, a barely there sound, but enough to ease the worry bubbling inside Charlie. "A weird one," Knox admits, piquing Charlie's interest. "She…ugh – she wanted to ask if I was going to bring anyone home for Christmas."

There's a pause, and Charlie imagines Knox shifting his weight awkwardly, probably running a hand through his hair like he always does when he's unsure. He's still standing there, not quite committed to coming in, the tension in his body evident even without seeing it.

"Oh?" Charlie prompts, raising an eyebrow even though Knox can't see it.

"Yeah, apparently something about my latest Instagram updates led her to some assumptions – it's not important," Knox says quickly, his voice dropping, as if embarrassed by the whole thing.

Charlie hesitates, choosing his words carefully. "I didn't know you were going to your mother's for Christmas," he says, because that feels safer than delving into whatever Knox's mom might have assumed based on his social media.

There's more shuffling at the door, the unmistakable sound of a shocked foot brushing against wooden floor. Knox's voice comes out quiet and even more strained. "That was one of her assumptions."

"Oh," Charlie breathes out, unsure what else to say. Then, something in Charlie's chest tugs, an impulse to close the space between them. "Knox?"

"Mhm?"

"You want to come inside?"

"Oh uhm… are you sure?" Knox's ever familiar hesitation makes Charlie's stomach flip, and he can almost see the way Knox's hands would be raised slightly, like he's trying to retreat but doesn't want to. "I don't – I shouldn't have bothered you, it's too late, I just –"

“Knox –”

“You know how weird this whole thing with my mom is-”

“Knox –”

“And I just needed to talk to you about it, but it’s too late, and I-”

“Knox!” Charlie interrupts, louder now, his voice filled with something almost like exasperated fondness. “Just get in here, will you?”

For a moment, Knox doesn’t move, as if weighing Charlie’s invitation. The hesitation is palpable, but then Charlie hears the soft scrape of his socks on the floor as he finally steps inside, gently closing the door behind him. Charlie pushes himself to sit up fully, kicking back the duvet, and folding his legs in front of him, wanting to appear casual despite the fact that even the thought of getting Knox into his bed is enough to make a non existent aneurism burst in his brain. He swallows his nerves down, trying to relax his shoulders and –

He hears the sound of his desk chair being dragged close to the bed.

“You know I meant here-here, right?” he asks, hoping to mask his obvious feeling of rejection with incredulity.

“We’ll get there,” Knox says laconically, settling into the chair with careful movements, his posture stiff enough to indicate the level of his discomfort.

“Okay, so this phone call was worse than you made it sound,” Charlie surmises, eyeing him in the darkness. Knox taps his foot against the floor, his fingers twisting the hem of his sweater.

“It was weird, I told you,” Knox sounds almost defensive, and Charlie arches an eyebrow. Knox sighes, head falling back, once again exposing his neck in the way that drives Charlie absolutely crazy.

Charlie wonders fleetingly if Knox bleeds easy, and if his nails are sharp enough to break skin.

A choked breath comes past his lips and he leans against his headboard, gripping his spare pillow, bringing it into his lap, hoping it will be enough to ground him.

“Well what did she assume?” Charlie asks, fingers digging into the softness of his pillow.

Knox bites his lip, hesitating again. When he finally speaks, his voice is

quieter, barely audible in the dark. "She thinks I'm… seeing someone. That I've been hiding it from her."

"Knoxious! You haven't told her about us? How could you?"

It's a knee-jerk reaction. Charlie feels the contents of his stomach traveling up his throat, and he swallows down the bile, all the while biting down on his tongue hard enough to taste blood.

A startled laugh comes out of Knox's lips. "It must've slipped my mind, dear," he says, voice lighter than before.

***Why would she assume you're seeing someone?** Charlie wants to ask.*

"Well that's very incosiderate of you," he ends up saying.

Charlie wants to throw up, but Knox laughs again and his traitorous heart makes a somersault at the sound. Charlie feels a delirious laugh build in his chest, and he claws at it, until it dies out.

"I'm staying with my dad for Christmas, anyway," Knox breaks the silence, foot still tapping against Charlie's carpeted floor. "I always do. I don't know why she thought I would be going to hers, I've never done that."

"Maybe it's wistfull thinking?" Charlie guesses, untagling the words from the mess inside his mind, and forcing them out.

"Maybe."

Why would she assume you're seeing someone, Knox?

The vines have made their nest inside his lungs, and Charlie can feel them sucking his oxygen to help themselves grow. Soon they'll wrap around his stomach and his intestines and then they'll make an attempt for his heart. His heart that's been beating a mile a minute since Knox first appeared at his door.

Why would she –

Why –

Are you seeing anyone?

Knox?

Please, don't be seeing anyone.

“I’m sorry I woke you up, Char,” Knox murmurs, voice gentle now, almost shy.

“Don’t be stupid, Knoxious,” Charlie manages, despite the tightness in his chest. “You know you can talk to me about anything.”

Knox looks up, his expression soft in a way that makes Charlie’s heart ache. The vines tighten their grip. “Yeah, I know,” he says quietly. “That’s why I came here.”

“Good,” Charlie says, his voice lower than he intended. “You can always come to me.”

Knox’s foot taps lightly against the floor again, but the restless energy seems to have faded. “I should probably let you sleep,” he says after a while, though he doesn’t make any move to leave just yet.

“Yeah, maybe.”

Knox rises slowly from the chair, stretching his arms above his head, and Charlie’s eyes linger on him for just a moment too long. He forces himself to look away as Knox heads toward the door.

“Goodnight, Charlie,” Knox says softly, his hand resting on the doorknob.

“Goodnight, Knox,” Charlie replies, his voice barely a whisper.

Knox hesitates for a split second before slipping out of the room, the door clicking shut behind him. Charlie lets out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding, his heart still pounding in his chest. He pulls the pillow closer, clutching it to his chest as if it can somehow keep the ache at bay.

The vines in his lungs tighten their grip again, but this time, Charlie lets them.

The next morning Charlie is jolted out of his restless sleep by a loud noise on the first floor. He jumps on his bed, blinking at the sunlight spilling through the curtains, his mind still groggy from the half-sleep he’d fallen into. Charlie falls back into his bed, a groan leaving his mouth. He runs both hands through his hair, pulling at it just enough to feel the sting in his scalp —a small, grounding pain against the ache in his chest. His fingers stay buried there for a moment, tugging slightly as if trying to pull himself together.

Charlie drags a hand down his face, palms pressing into his cheeks as

he exhales a shaky breath. He feels the knot in his chest tighten, that familiar pressure squeezing his lungs. He closes his eyes, trying to push away the anxiety already creeping up his throat. The same thought has been playing in a loop in his mind throughout the night.

Fake dating.

Fake dating.

This was all supposed to be fake.

Charlie groans again. This wasn't the plan! The plan – *Knox's* plan – was simple; play the part of loving boyfriends to help Neil and Todd along, make it look just convincing enough, and call it quits when it was all said and done. Easy. Safe. No feelings involved, returning from their deep sleep. No emotional unraveling at the seams every time Knox smiled, or laughed, or looked at him for a second too long.

Charlie squeezes his eyes shut, fingers curling into the bedsheet beneath him, twisting it into a knot. His breathing becomes shallow, his pulse quickening against his will. The vines in his lungs are coiling tighter, growing thorns that dig into his ribcage.

He is blowing things out of proportion, he's probably just horny. He hasn't had any in real action for more than three months, and all this play pretend with Knox has messed up his head. He just… he needs to keep Knox at a distance, until this whole thing blows over, focus on helping Neil and Todd and once they're sorted, he can figure out how to deal with his own mess. Yeah, that's the smart move; play his part better, keep things light, keep things fun. Keep Knox from seeing just how deep he's in.

A sudden loud noise from downstairs startles him again. Charlie jerks upright, wincing at the abrupt movement. He presses his fingers against his eyes, the pressure making stars dance behind his eyelids. He allows himself one more moment of stillness, his chest rising and falling with deliberate slowness, before dragging his body out of bed.

He shivers as his bare feet hit the cold floor. The morning air is crisp, biting against his skin, and he instinctively rubs his arms to warm them up, the cashmere soft under his touch. He makes a mental note to check the thermostat later as he pulls on a shirt and slumps down the stairs.

As he approaches the kitchen, the smell of bacon and coffee reaches him before the voices do, a faint comfort that stirs his appetite despite

his nerves. He steps into the room, catching snippets of the conversation before anyone notices him.

“So, what time are we supposed to get there?” Meeks asks, his voice cutting though the clatter of dishes.

“Eight-ish? Nine?” Pitts replies. “We can’t show up later than nine thirty, thought.”

“How many parties must we attend this year?” Cameron’s voice is a mixture of despair and resignation.

“At least five,” Meeks deadpans, taking a sip of coffee.

“We’re trying to break last years record,” Pitts adds, grinning.

“And you’re trying to steal back my very much deserved title,” Meeks notes, with a smug grin.

“That’s my title, that you stole from me!” Pitts retorts, voice rising.

“I earned it by outdrinking five dudes!”

“You stole it by outdrinking five nerds!”

Charlie slides into the room quietly, leaning against the doorway. His arms are crossed loosely over his chest, his gaze scanning the group.

“You know Charlie could drink you under the table if he tried, right?” Knox’s voice is casual, but the words hang in the air, almost daring, as he speaks them. His lips curve into a slow, knowing smile. And then—his eyes lock with Charlie’s, pinning him to the spot.

Charlie’s lips part as if to say something, but nothing comes out. His hands, still resting on his arms, grip his sleeves tighter. His fingers twitch, a restless energy pulsing through them. In that moment, the air shifts. Charlie feels his stomach flip, his pulse pounding hot and fast in his throat.

Yeah, he is just horny.

“He won’t do that, though,” Pitts says, something akin to warning in his tone, as he follows Knox’s gaze to look at Charlie.

“Nah, Dalton’s far too cool for such childish antics,” Meeks quips, tilting his head to one side, his gaze sliding over to Charlie with a knowing look.

Charlie forces a chuckle, the sound a little rougher than usual. The corner of his mouth pulls into a half-smirk, but it feels strained. “You’re trying to manipulate me, Steven,” he says, trying to inject some lightness into his voice.

Meeks doesn’t flinch, his expression cool and collected. “It’s working, isn’t it?” he replies, completely unfazed.

Charlie rolls his eyes, moving closer to the table. The seat next to Knox is empty. Charlie sits between Meeks and Pitts instead.

“Where’s Perry and Todd? Still auditioning?” he asks, his voice casual, though his mind still feels far from settled.

Meeks snorts, taking a long sip of his coffee before answering. “Todd has a meeting with his thesis advisor. He’ll be gone the whole morning.”

“Shouldn’t *you* have a meeting about your thesis, Dalton?” Cameron interjects, his voice cutting through the room like a blade.

“And where’s Neil?” Charlie asks, his fingers drumming against the table. Cameron huffs, shaking his head at his attempt to change the topic.

“Went over to help Ginny get everything ready for the party,” Pitts says, a look of concentration taking over his face, as he butters a piece of toast.

“Who’s Ginny?” Charlie frown, his mind too preoccupied to keep track of names.

Meeks sets his coffee cup down, raising an eyebrow. “His co-lead in the last three plays that he’s done,” Meeks says, slow and pointedly. “You *know* that, Charlie.”

Charlie’s frown deepens for a second, his fingers tapping more insistently against the table before he catches himself. He sighs, rubs a hand over the back of his neck, feeling his muscles taut. “Right. Yeah, sorry. It slipped my mind.”

Meeks' eyes narrow as he stares at him, and Charlie’s irritation bristles just underneath the surface. As if dealing with the vines trying to choke him isn’t enough, now he has to contend with Meeks picking apart his every micro-expression. It’s suffocating.

He turns his attention to the coffee-pot, and he makes a move to reach for it. But then a mug is pressed to his fingers, full and steaming cutting off his movement.

“No sugar, just cream.”

Charlie’s mind blanks for a second, as his eyes fall on Knox’s hand.

Fuck his life.

Really – just…

Charlie bites his tongue, forces a smile on his face as he takes the mug from Knox’s hand. Knox’s lips spread into a smile and the knot in his chest tightens enough to shutter his next breath.

“Ah, young love,” Pitts coos mockingly from across the table, the teasing tone light, but it feels like a jab to Charlie. Cameron scoffs beside him.

“Speaking of, how was your date last night, Richard?” Meeks asks, eyes darting to Cameron over the rim of his mug.

“Right, we have a new *Casanova* in town now that Charlie Dalton has finally settled down,” Pitts remarks, throwing a devious smile at Cameron.

“Don’t call me that, and I thought both of you were more mature than this,” Cameron says, lifting his chin and looking at them from under his nose.

“Oh, c’mon Ricky, spill the beans,” Pitts eggs him on.

“Yeah, Richie, tell us about your moderately fun date,” Meeks adds, playing his eyebrows.

Knox laughs a little at their friends’ antics and Charlie feels like screaming at the impressive somersault his stomach performs at the sound of it. He takes a long swig from his coffee, the scalding liquid burning its way down his throat. Charlie winces involuntarily, his face contorting before he can stop it.

Knox’s laughter fades, and his expression shifts, concern flickering in his eyes. “Charlie,” he starts, voice soft, and that look—the concern in Knox’s face, directed at him—makes Charlie feel like he’s going to explode.

“The dangers of caffeine addiction that no one warns you about,” Charlie jokes, the words coming out a little too quickly, his voice tight and almost breathless. He shifts in his seat, leaning back slightly as if to create some physical distance between himself and Knox’s concerned gaze.

“Is everything okay?” Knox asks, voice low to not attract attention to their conversation.

Charlie fakes another smile, the muscles in his face twitching as he holds onto it. “Yeah, everything is fine, why are you asking, Knoxious?” he asks, feigning surprise. Knox’s eyes flicker all over his face, before returning to his.

“I don’t know, you seem a bit… jitter-ish.” Knox says quietly, his eyes narrowing a little.

Charlie lets out a forced chuckle, rolling his shoulders trying to shake off the weight pressing down on him. “It’s all good, young Padawan,” he says, going for some levity, even though his heart isn’t in it.

“If you say so,” Knox's tone softer now, uncertain.

“Trust me, Knoxie,” Charlie says, his voice almost a whisper as he lowers his gaze to his lap, fingers still gripping the mug as if it’s the only thing anchoring him to the moment.

“I do,” Knox says, his gaze still on him - soft, unwavering. It's too much.

Too fucking much.

The dam inside Charlie’s heart breaks and everything he’s been bottling up since last year comes sloshing in, soaking everything. The vines sing their praises for the arrival, strengthening their grip on his vital organs and Charlie turns a chocked cough into forced laugh. It’s too harsh, too brittle and it makes Knox frown at him.

“Well, good to know, buddy,” Charlie says, his voice hollow as he sets his mug down harder than he means to.

He needs to get out.

“I’m gonna go check on… the radiator,” he says, pushing himself up from the table, his legs shaky beneath him,

He can't stay here.

Without waiting for a response, Charlie turns on his heel and he heads for the door. His movements are stiff, his shoulders tight as if the tension might crack him open if he doesn't get out fast enough. He doesn't even notice the way Meeks and Pitts exchange a quick glance, sensing something off, but he's too far gone to care.

The cool air hits him head on the moment he steps outside, but it does little to ease the turmoil going inside him. Charlie swallows hard, running a hand through his hair, tugging at the short strands on his nape. He folds his body in two, right in the middle of the walkway, his hands gripping his knees, eyes squeezed shut.

"Get it together, Dalton," he murmurs to himself, but –

It's too much, it's too much, it's too much.

But he can't. Not this time. Not when the dam has broken, and every feeling he's been running from is now flooding his mind, suffocating him. Charlie chokes on them, crumbling under the weight of everything he's feeling.

He is in love with Knox.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

He presses the heels of his hands against his eyes, trying to push the thoughts away, but they're persistent, louder now that he's alone.

And then—he hears it. The soft creak of the front door opening behind him.

Panic surges, hot and immediate. Without thinking, Charlie bolts, his body moving on instinct. He sprints down the road, his name echoing behind him, Meeks' voice chasing after him—but he doesn't stop. He can't.

He is still in his pajamas.

He is still in his slippers.

He is still very much in love with Knox.

Charlie runs.

And he runs.

And he runs.

The only reason he shows up at the party is because he's half-certain Neil will send a fire squad out looking for him if he doesn't. So, reluctantly, Charlie puts on his big-boy pants, returns to the house after he's made sure the rest of the poets are gone, and gets ready for the pre-Christmas-Christmas-bash.

The Danbury Estate is an imposing manor just outside the schools' property. It's big enough to make the less affluent of Charlie's peers feel inadequate. Charlie himself finds it garish, like most of the houses he's been forced to spend his Christmas' holidays in as a kid. There are two gardens, one at the front and one at the back, and they're both impeccably dolled up with Christmas' decorations; wreaths hang from every window, and strings of lights twist around the tall hedges, blinking in timed, orchestrated patterns. The front garden is dominated by an enormous tree, decked out with ornaments that gleam like jewels in the evening light. It towers over the driveway like a monument to excess. Everything here is polished, *perfect*.

Inside, the house is even more overdone than the outside. The scent of pine and cinnamon hangs heavy in the air, clearly meant to evoke a sense of warmth and holiday spirit, but to Charlie, it feels more suffocating than festive. A grand chandelier hangs from the ceiling, casting a golden glow over the crowded foyer. Garlands twist around every banister, and there's a massive fireplace roaring in the corner, but it all feels calculated, with no personal touches — just expensive trinkets that scream wealth without any warmth

Charlie is not exactly hiding, but he isn't going out of his way to stand out. He's taken refuge near the fireplace, the heat prickling at his skin. He pulls a cigarette out from his pocket, but doesn't light it, choosing instead to twirl it between his fingers, as he leans against the wall, his eyes roaming around the room.

Of course, the first person they land on is Knox.

Knox, looking effortlessly sharp in a black turtleneck, pleated dress pants, and a perfectly tailored jacket.

Charlie feels a little bit faint upon seeing him.

Charlie feels a little bit like pouncing on him.

As if sensing his eyes on him Knox turns and their gazes lock. A string

of curse words easily rolls off Charlie's tongue and falls from his lips under his breath, just as Knox's expression sharpens and he starts making his way over, cutting through the crowd with purpose.

"You bolted," he says accusingly, the moment he stops in front of him and Charlie has half the mind to do so again. "What the hell, dude?"

"Do I get one chance at gashlighting you?" Charlie quips, his voice strained as he tries to mask the swirl of emotions threatening to break through the surface.

Knox frowns, not amused. "What the hell, Charlie?" He repeats, his tone serious now, searching Charlie's face for answers.

"I—" Charlie hesitates, suddenly feeling cornered. Knox's gaze is too intense, too direct, and Charlie can't stand it. "I don't know what was wrong with me, I just... couldn't stay."

"At our house?" Knox asks, perplexed and Charlie feels like clawing his eyes out.

"Yes," he says through gritted teeth.

"Right… You know you can talk to me, about anything," Knox says, gaze imploring. Charlie bites on his tongue, counts to ten.

"I know," he finally forces out, feeling the weight of Knox's scrutiny.

"Right," Knox says again, his voice softening. He doesn't seem to buy his excuse, but he lets it go. And then a moment later, he steps closer, his hand brushing against Charlie's arm so lightly it sends a shiver down Charlie's spine. The touch is so brief, so subtle, yet it sends everything inside Charlie spiraling out of control. He is hesitant at first, but eventually his fingers travel lower, resolutely wrapping around Charlie's wrist. "Come on, then."

"What? Where?" Charlie stumbles over the words, his feet moving almost on their own accord as Knox leads him through the crowd.

Knox doesn't say anything, he just keeps walking until they reach the center of the room. Bodies press in on them, forcing Charlie to step forward, right into Knox's personal space to avoid being stepped on. He huffs in annoyance, but when Knox wraps an arm securely around his waist, pulling him closer, Charlie's breath catches. It's an innocent touch, or it's *meant* to be, but it sents his pulse into a frenzy and Charlie feels dizzy.

“I don’t dance, Knox, you know that” his words come out breathy, despite his best effort at keeping his tone casual.

“Char,” Knox starts, voice dropping into a playful cadence, “I’m just a boy, standing in front of another boy, asking him for a chance to sweep him off his feet.”

Charlie’s throat tightens, a real laugh bubbling out despite himself. Knox’s grin widens, clearly pleased with himself. “Besides, it will look suspicious if we don’t dance,” he adds, leaning in closer so no one else can overhear. Knox’s breath brushes against Charlie’s face, smelling strongly of alcohol, but Charlie finds he doesn’t mind.

“Well, don’t come at me when I break your toes,” Charlie tries to joke, but it feels flat, his anxiousness far too prominent to his own ears.

“Actually… just step on my feet, I'll guide you.”

“What?" Charlie asks, blinking at him, momentarily thrown off.

“Just the tips of your feet, Char," Knox explains patiently, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world. “Every time I move, you do the same.”

“Are you trying to get yourself hurt?” Charlie questions, a mix of perplexity and concern flashing across his features. If he hadn’t been so focused on Knox’s face, he might have missed the fleeting vulnerability in his friend’s eyes.

“I’m actually desperately trying to avoid it,” Knox's response catches him off guard with how somber it comes out and Charlie’s eyes snap in attention. “At least this way I’ll control how it goes. C’mon, hop on.”

Charlie hesitates, staring at Knox like he’s lost his mind. The crowded room, the warmth of Knox’s arm around his waist—*too much, too much, too much.* But Knox’s face is open, genuine, and his grip around Charlie’s waist is equal parts firm and gentle. Charlie’s body moves before his mind catches up, and he shifts his weight, almost experimentally, placing the tips of his shoes lightly on Knox’s feet.

“There you go,” Knox says, smiling softly as he tightens his hold just a little, his other hand reaching to rest on Charlie’s shoulder.

Charlie feels ridiculous, but for some reason, it works. Knox begins to move, slowly at first, guiding Charlie in what is technically a dance,

but really just an elaborate balancing act between two boys who are way too close to each other for comfort—or maybe too close for Charlie's comfort, because Knox seems utterly at ease.

"Look," Knox murmurs after a beat, leaning even closer to Charlie to peer through a gap in the throng of people. The proximity sends a jolt through Charlie's body and his pulse skyrockets. He swallows hard, trying to steady himself as he follows Knox's gaze.

Todd and Neil are sprawled on an otherwise empty couch, close enough to be considered cuddling. And it's not that weird, seeing them seated so close, but out of the confines of their shared household? In the public? And being this casual about it? Todd's face is flushed, and Neil is laughing and yes, Charlie would've been elated that their plan is working—if not for the tightness in his chest and vines curling in his lungs, choking him from the inside out.

"You think we did this?" Charlie asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Nah, don't be obtuse; that's all their doing. We just… gave them a nudge in the right direction," Knox replies, a playful glint in his eyes.

"A nudge, huh?"

"I'd say so. I think they just realized that they can have both - the friendship and the… more."

"And you think us dating –"

"Fake dating," they both say in unison, Knox chuckling at the way Charlie's lips press together in annoyance.

"You think our pretend relationship helped them realize that? Are we that important?"

"You are," Knox says, his tone unexpectedly gentle and serious for the moment. Charlie feels his breath catch in his throat; Knox's gaze pierces through him, as if staring straight into his soul. "I know you loathe acknowledging it, but Neil has always followed your example without missing a beat. You are that important to him. He sees how our relationship has 'changed' and how we've managed to remain close friends throughout. He realized he could do the same because you did it first."

The vines twist in his guts. The warmth of Knox's hand on his back

feels electric, sending sparks coursing through his veins, setting the pit of his stomach on fire.

“What about Anderson?” he asks to distract himself, brows furrowing.

Knox meets his eyes, biting the inside of his cheek, weighing his response. “Todd was willing to risk it anyway.”

Just a string of words—words that shouldn’t evoke such a rush of emotion inside Charlie’s brain. But they do, and he feels—

“I’m sorry, wait,” Charlie cuts in abruptly, his voice louder than before, tension bubbling over. “Did you just call me *obtuse*?”

He bulldozes through the moment, desperate to reclaim some semblance of control.

Knox blinks, surprised at the sudden change of tone. but then his lips spread into a smile. “And what if I did?” Knox replies, the playfulness returning to his voice.

“Fancy vocabulary, you’ve acquired. Very proper.”

“Well, I am a pre-law student,” Knox says smugly, puffing his chest ever so slightly. Charlie feels the patter of Knox’ heart underneath his fingertips and smoothly moves his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“And my major is in English Lit, but I don’t speak like I’ve swallowed a dictionary.”

“In your case it wouldn’t be the weirdest thing to swallow.”

Charlie almost chokes with his own spit. He gapes at Knox, sputtering for a whole ass minute before finally finding his voice. “Knox Overstreet, do you kiss your mother with that mouth?”

“Not really, no,” Knox responds with a smirk. Then, a beat later, his tone softens. “You’re doing great, by the way.”

Charlie snorts. “Yeah, I’ll believe that when you don’t end up limping tomorrow.”

For a while, neither of them speaks. They don’t need to. Knox continues guiding Charlie, slow and steady, their movements small, subtle in the middle of the crowded room. Little by little, Charlie feels himself easing, though he remains acutely aware of Knox—of every inch of space that separates them, of every accidental brush of skin.

But the tension between them begins to thaw, as if they've settled into the rhythm of each other.

"Hey you two."

Whatever mood Charlie is in immediately sours at the sound of Chris Noel's voice. Because of course she is there. Briefly, he wonders if there's ever been a party Chris Noel hasn't graced with her presence.

Knox's attention is ripped away in an instant, his eyes softening and lighting up as he turns to look at the girl standing to his left. Charlie feels the absence of Knox's hand on his shoulder like a sudden chill, a stark contrast to the warmth that had enveloped him moments before. He tries not to flinch at the sudden loss, forcing himself to remain composed.

"Chris!" Knox exclaims like he hasn't seen her in years, and it's a hard trial for Charlie not to roll his eyes. "I didn't know you'd be here."

"Weird, considering I mentioned it twice last time we met," Chris replies, tilting her head playfully. Charlie pretends his stomach doesn't twist into a knot at the teasing tone in her voice, or at the way she playfully swats Knox's arm.

"No way, I would've remembered," Knox replies with an exaggerated expression of innocence.

Chris kinks an eyebrow. "One would think, yes. But clearly, you didn't." She glances over at Charlie, her brow furrowing slightly. "Charlie, you okay? You look a little... off."

"Hm?" Charlie feigns ignorance, quickly schooling his features. He has no idea what his expression had been, but Chris's sudden concern doesn't bode well. "Yeah, everything is fine."

"You sure?" she presses, a hint of genuine concern in her voice. Knox turns to him as well, his gaze questioning.

Charlie pulls a smirk across his lips—tight, forced.

He wants Knox to call him out on it, to notice how fake it is, but he knows better than to let that happen.

"I'm sure, Noel; I'm perfectly *peachy*."

He is lying out of his ass.

Knox doesn't comment on it.

"In fact," Charlie adds, "I think there's a vodka bottle over there with my name on it. Excuse me." He gestures vaguely toward the drinks station, already inching away.

"But I wanted to talk to you about something," Knox starts, reaching for him.

Charlie dodges him effortlessly. "We are at a party, Knoxious. People party here, they don't have deep conversations," he shrugs, giving Knox a nonchalant smile.

Knox has the audacity to pout at him.

Stupid idiot.

"Come on—" Knox tries again, but Charlie is already slipping away, threading his way through the crowd.

"Can't hear you," Charlie calls over his shoulder, raising his voice above the music. "Too far away. Your voice is breaking up."

"We're not on the phone, you idiot!" Knox shouts back, sounding half-amused, half-exasperated.

"Sorry, going through a tunnel!" Charlie shouts back, adding some faux static noise for good measure, vanishing into the crowd before Knox can protest further.

Charlie makes his way toward the lavish bar, its marble surface gleaming under the soft glow of the chandelier above. Crystal decanters filled with amber and clear liquids are lined up like prized trophies, each more expensive than the last. He reaches for the vodka, the bottle heavy in his hand, and pours himself a shot into an intricately cut glass.

He downs it quickly, grimacing as the heat spreads through his veins, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. The warmth helps, but only a little, barely enough to soften the edges of the thoughts swirling in his head. As Charlie sets his glass down, his eyes instinctively drift back toward Knox and Chris. They're dancing together—nothing intimate, totally PG13 rated. There's enough space between them for anyone to slip through, miles of distance compared to the way Knox had held him earlier. Still, they're dancing, and Knox's laughter—bright and carefree—spills into the room, his smile lighting up his entire face.

Charlie wants to wring his neck.

Charlie wants to kiss him.

How the hell did he end up back here? Back to square one, tangled up in knots over Knox Overstreet? He'd spent months clawing his way out of that fixation, finally being able to move on around the time Knox met Chris and started obsessing about her.

Did you really move on, though?

The nagging voice in the back of his mind sounds an awful lot like Neil, and Charlie takes a long swig of vodka, hoping to drown it out. Because yes—he had moved on. He was finally able to see other people, even find them attractive the way he once found Knox attractive. Hell, he'd been genuinely happy for his best friend. Chris was a nice girl, and she'd make a great girlfriend.

Okay, but if you had moved on, a few weeks of playing pretend wouldn't have wrecked you like this.

"Oh, shut up, Neil!" Charlie mutters, the thought slipping out before he can stop it. He downs the rest of his drink in one go, as if the burn might silence the voice.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?"

Charlie nearly jumps out of his skin. He whirls around to find a girl staring at him, a pair of amber eyes framed by thick lashes quickly finding his own. Charlie runs a hand through his hair, offering her a sheepish smile.

"Sorry, I was… I was talking to myself," Charlie says, and immediately cringes. Lame. But he's already feeling low, so why add lying to the mix?

The girl just shrugs, unfazed.

"It's okay, I do that sometimes too," she says, her smile warm and genuine, lighting up her eyes. "Are you here alone?" She glances subtly behind him, probably checking for any signs of friends. Charlie's gaze betrays him, flickering over to where Knox is still dancing with Chris. They're holding hands now, and whatever Knox just said must've been hilarious, because Chris throws her head back in laughter, carefree and radiant.

Charlie swallows hard, trying to push down the vines climbing up his throat. “Yeah,” he mutters, stirring the ice in his glass with a half-hearted swirl. “What about you?”

"Oh, I have lots of friends around," she says with a big smile. "I'm making rounds, trying to see everybody, but... I needed a second to - be, I guess."

“Guess that happens at parties,” Charlie mutters absently, his thoughts still stuck on the image of Knox and Chris together.

“Guess so,” she replies, her tone light but friendly, the brief silence between them comfortable but weighted with something unspoken.

Charlie leans back slightly, letting the lull in conversation stretch. There’s an elegance to the way she carries herself, even in silence. His eyes drift to her again as she retrieves a cigarette from a slim silver case. The cigarette dangles from her lips as she absently touches her evening dress—deep burgundy, silk by the look of it—likely searching for a lighter.

He watches her for a moment, amused by the slight crease of frustration forming on her brow. When her elegant but futile search turns more determined, he finally steps in, taking pity on her.

“Here,” he says, producing his lighter from his jacket pocket.

She looks up, eyebrows raised in mild surprise but intrigued. He tilts his head ever so slightly as he flicks the lighter, the flame flickering between them, dancing in her eyes.

“Thank you,” she says, cigarette still balanced between her lips, her voice smooth and unbothered.

“Don’t mention it,” Charlie replies, pocketing the lighter, his gaze lingering on her as she takes a drag.

She exhales slowly, the smoke curling upward before she turns to him with a playful glint in her eyes. “So, do you have a name?”

Charlie smirks. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“You’d be surprised,” she says, her tone mysterious, lips curling into a smile.

“Oh?” His brow arches, curiosity piqued.

“Interesting story,” she teases, taking another puff. “Maybe for another time. I’m Ginny, by the way. Ginny Danbury.”

The name clicks in Charlie’s mind, and he can’t help the small flicker of surprise that crosses his face. Of course, *she’s* the hostess.

"You're Neil's friend," he says instead, the realization settling in as he quickly connects the dots.

Ginny raises an eyebrow, amused. "Among other things, sure." She exhales another stream of smoke, watching him through the haze. "And you must be Charlie."

"That obvious?"

"Neil talks about you. A lot." She smirks, tilting her head slightly. "He also doesn’t shut up about the rest of the *poets;* Todd, Meeks, Pitts, Knox," she counts using her free hand.

Charlie’s stomach tightens at the mention, his eyes darting briefly across the room to where Knox is still dancing with Chris. "You forgot Cameron," he says forcing a smile. "But yeah, that's us."

Ginny watches him closely, as if she’s already piecing things together, but mercifully, she doesn’t press. Instead, she leans back, taking another lazy drag from her cigarette. "Well, welcome to my party, Charlie."

"I'm happy to be here," Charlie says with what he hopes comes of as a genuine smile.

Ginny bites on the inside of her lips, but she cannot stop them from curling into a smirk. "I'm sorry, but it's too obvious you're lying."

"What? No, I'm not," Charlie protests, playing up his indingnation. Ginny giggles, and it sounds nothing like what he would've expected. "Ginny Danbury, I feel honored to have been invited to your party!"

Ginny leans in slightly, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Oh really? Because you look like you’d rather be anywhere else.” She quirks an eyebrow, challenging him, her lips curling into a teasing smirk.

Charlie shrugs, too caught up in the moment to think straight, “Maybe I was just waiting for the right distraction,” he replies, his voice lower as he leans in, his own smirk growing. “And it seems I found it.”

“Is that your way of flirting, or are you always this charming?” Ginny teases, a playful smile dancing on her lips.

“Depends on who's asking,” Charlie replies, a hint of a challenge in his tone as he leans slightly closer, a grin playing at the corners of his mouth.

“Mhm, well, you know,” Ginny says softly, her voice laced with intrigue. “Charm can get you so far.”

"Oh, and what else do I need?"

"Confidence, for starters," Ginny repilies, pearl white teeth worrying her bottom lip. Charlie allows his gaze to wander her features, taking in the way her strawberry-blond hair cascades in soft waves around her shoulders, glinting like spun gold under the dim party lights. A delicate beauty mark rests just above her left cheekbone. His eyes momentarily flicker to her lips slightly full and tinted with a cherry-red hue, curve into a knowing smile that suggests she’s always in on a secret.

Suddenly, she closes the distance between them, her fingers deftly grasping the lapels of his jacket as if pulling him into her orbit. Charlie instinctively reaches up to cradle her face, his thumb gliding softly along her jawline, tracing the delicate curve of her skin. Ginny tilts her head slightly, her eyes glinting with a mixture of mischief and warmth, and their lips meet in a sudden rush. Her lips are soft, tasting faintly of whiskey, and he catches a hint of lavender in her hair—a stark contrast to the warm, familiar scent of Knox's cologne.

Knox's cologne.

Charlie's brain short-circuits and he abruptly pulls back, blinking rappidly.

“I—sorry, I didn’t mean to—” he stammers, scrambling for words as the weight of his feelings for Knox crashes down on him. Ginny licks her lips, her eyes flickering to something behind Charlie’s back, her expression shifting subtly.

"It's alright," she says, her gaze returning to his with a hint of understanding. "It looks like someone's looking for you, anyway," she adds, taking a step back, creating space between them that Charlie suddenly feels reluctant to lose.

Charlie doesn't have to turn around to know who's standing there.

There's only one person who'd come looking for him.

"Ugh, I—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt anything," Knox stumbles over his words, his voice awkward and unsure.

"And yet," Charlie bristles, irritation prickling at his skin as he slowly turns around, arms crossing defensively over his chest.

"I just wanted to check on you."

"I'm a big boy, Knoxious, I can handle myself," Charlie snaps. "Besides, this is a party, why would you need to check on me?"

"You-you were in a mood before, and Chris suggested that I should, maybe, come check on you -"

"And God forbid you don't do exactly what Chris tells you to do, right, Overstreet?" Charlie retorts, the words spilling out before he can stop himself. He feels a flicker of satisfaction as Knox's jaw tightens.

Knox flinches at Charlie's words, and for a moment, his expression hardens. "That's not fair," he replies, his voice steady but laced with hurt. He straightens up, shoulders squared, hands flexing at his sides as if he's preparing for a fight. "Don't bring Chris into this."

"Oh, I'm sorry, did I offend your precious *girlfriend*?" Charlie's words drip with sarcasm. There's a part of his brain, a small, rational one, that knows he is pushing too far, but the rest of him - the Charlie who's already too hurt, too tired, wants to push Knox to his breaking point. Give him a taste of his own medicine.

"This has nothing to do with Chris," Knox insists, the muscles in his jaw tensing as he clenches his fists at his sides. He takes a step closer, the intensity in his gaze like a spark igniting a fire.

Charlie scoffs, feeling the heat of their argument electrify the air between them. "This has everything to do with Chris!" he yells, throwing his hands in the air in a physical manifestation of his frustration. The movement is wild, a mixture of desperation and anger, and he feels his heart racing, blood pounding in his ears.

"Is Chris the reason you've been avoiding me for weeks? Is she the reason you're hardly at home anymore? Or maybe she's the reason you ran off at breakfast?" The words tumble out of Knox's mouth in a rush, fueled by frustration and confusion, and he can see Knox's eyes narrow slightly, hurt flashing across his features.

"I did not run off. I just -"

“You just needed some time for yourself, I know! Such a lame excuse, Charlie.” The disdain in Knox's voice is palpable, and he shifts his weight, crossing his arms in frustration.

“I’m sorry, do you want me to find a better one for you?” Charlie shoots back, a bitter smile playing on his lips.

"No, I'm actually sick of your excuses! I've tried to -to be understanding, and give you your space -"

“Is this your idea of giving me space, Knoxious? Checking on me at a fucking party?” Charlie's voice rises again, the words hanging heavy in the air.

“I wanted to make sure you were alright, you insufferable human being!” Knox retorts, his hands balled into fists at his sides, muscles taut with emotion. The tension between them is electric, a fierce dance of frustration and unspoken feelings.

"And cock-block me while doing so."

"Oh, my god, Charlie just -"

“Just what, Knox?” Charlie challenges, stepping closer, their faces inches apart, anger crackling between them.

In that moment, something shifts in Knox’s expression—confusion mixed with a deep-seated concern—but Charlie can’t bear to look at it. Instead, he feels the frustration and pain rising up in his chest like a tide, and before he knows it, he’s turning on his heel, his heart pounding in his ears.

“Whatever, Knox. I’m done,” he snaps, the words bitter on his tongue as he storms off, weaving through the crowd. He leaves Knox standing there, a whirlwind of unresolved tension and unspoken words, feeling the weight of everything left unsaid pressing down on him as he escapes into the chaos of the party.

Charlie returns home, slamming the entrance door shut behind him with a force that rattles the frame. His steps are heavy as he strides to the living room, shedding his coat and jacket in a fit of frustration, hurling them onto the couch. The jacket lands with a soft thud before slipping soundlessly to the floor. He leans back against the wall,

feeling the weight of his heart pounding in his ears, vines of frustration wrapping tightly around his chest, and his mouth carries the bitter taste of whiskey and smoke.

Charlie feels like screaming.

“Chaz, is that you?” Neil’s voice drifts through the air before he appears, a look of concern etched on his face.

Charlie blinks, confusion swirling in his mind. “You’re supposed to be at the Danbury party,” he mutters.

Neil crosses his arms over his chest, his stance relaxed but his gaze unwavering. “So are you.”

Charlie splutters, trying to piece together the timeline. “But I saw you at the party.”

“And now you’re seeing me in our living room,” Neil replies, a familiar smile creeping onto his lips, though it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Everything alright?”

“What do you fucking think, Neil?” Charlie snaps, his voice sharp, the words laced with a mix of hurt and irritation..

Neil approaches him slowly, deliberately, his expression shifting from concern to sympathy. “I don’t know,” he says in a calm, conversational tone. “You’ve been acting so weird lately.”

“I have not,” Charlie protests, the denial tumbling from his lips too quickly.

"Yes, you have. And that's okay, that's fine; you're entitled to your feelings, but," Neil's head tilts on the side, his big brown eyes pinning straight into Charlie's soul. "You don't talk to me, Charlie."

Charlie blows a frustrated breath through his lips, running a hand through his hair. “We talk all the time,” he says defensively, but the confidence in his voice wavers.

Neil levels him with a steady gaze. “No, we don’t. I’ve tried to get you to open up, but no dice, slick.”

“I just—” Charlie sighs, the weight of his emotions pressing heavily on his chest, each breath a reminder of how tangled his feelings have become. “It’s all so messed up. I never should’ve agreed to this.”

“Agreed to what? Dating Knox?” Neil asks, confusion flickering in his eyes, his brow furrowing as he processes the weight of Charlie's words.

Charlie’s eyes brim with unshed tears, and he angrily rubs at them, frustration boiling beneath the surface. “I—I—God, this is so stupid! I’m stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” Neil reassures him, his tone steady and grounding. “Please, tell me what’s going on.” He steps closer, the concern in his posture radiating warmth, as if he’s reaching out to tether Charlie to reality.

Charlie swallows hard, the lump in his throat tightening. “I don’t know how to tell you,” he admits.

“I’m your best friend, Dalton. Just tell me anyway you want.” Neil's eyes, large and earnest, encourage him to open up, and Charlie feels the pressure mounting in his chest.

Taking a deep breath, Charlie steels himself, “Knox and I aren’t dating.”

Charlie *knows* that. He *knows* he is not dating Knox.

And yet his heart races, pounding against his ribcage as if trying to escape the reality of his words

“What?” Neil’s surprise is palpable, his eyes widening as if struggling to comprehend the revelation.

“We’ve been faking it for—the past couple of months, but… it’s not the real deal.”

“No, but I’ve seen you two when there’s no one around. That can’t be _”

“Neil,” Charlie cuts him off, shaking his head violently, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. “It’s all pretend. It always was.” The words spill out, heavy and suffocating, as if they’ve been trapped too long.

“Then why are you crying?” Neil asks, concern etched into his features, his brow knitting together. Charlie’s resolve finally breaks, and he covers his mouth to muffle the sobs that erupt from deep inside, his body trembling as the floodgates open. Neil’s eyes widen in

alarm, and in an instant, he pulls Charlie against his chest, leading him to the couch. “Charlie, why would you go and do something so stupid, when you know you already have feelings for him?"

"Because I thought I was over him, and be-because we were trying to help,” Charlie manages through his tears, his shoulders shaking as he leans into Neil’s embrace, seeking comfort in the familiar presence of his best friend.

“Help who?”

“You! And Todd! We were trying to show you that it can work, being a couple while you’re friends.” The confession spills out in a rush, heavy with desperation.

“Charlie,” Neil breathes, his expression shifting to one of heartbreak. Charlie doesn't miss the way Neil's eyes momentarilly flicker to the staircase. He dreads Neil's next words, a sinking feeling in his gut. “Chaz, Todd and I have been dating for months.”

“No,” The denial slips from Charlie’s lips before he can think, a reflexive response to the reality he can’t bear to accept.

“Yes. What you think that I go around cuddling with all of my friends?”

“Yes! Absolutely! Have you met you?!” Charlie cries, trying to pull away from Neil’s embrace, the panic rising in his chest. But Neil’s arms around his shoulders hold him firmly. “What do you mean you’ve been dating for months? Why are you telling me now?!”

“Todd wanted to wait. I guess we waited a bit too long.” Neil’s voice softens, filled with regret, and Charlie’s heart sinks further.

“That is just… amazing.” Charlie’s voice is thick with disbelief, disappointment crashing over him like waves. “So, I went and broke my heart for no reason at all?” He pauses, wiping angrily at the tears still lingering on his cheeks with the back of his hand. The heat of frustration rises in him, causing his hands to tremble slightly at his sides. "He gave me his sweater Neil. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“He gave you a shirt?” Neil asks, eyebrows raised, leaning slightly forward as if he’s trying to grasp the gravity of the situation.

“A sweater, cashmere. It’s his favorite,” Charlie snaps, frustration

evident in the way he clenches his fists at his sides, his nails digging into his palms.

“The red one?” Neil’s eyes widen, recognizing the significance.

“The red one. He bought one for himself and gave me the one I wouldn’t take off because I like it too much. Who the hell even does that?” Charlie shakes his head, the weight of the words crashing down on him. His shoulders slump, and he crosses his arms tightly over his chest as if to shield himself from the emotional storm brewing inside.

“Knox has always been the romantic type.”

“He is so fucking romantic, Neil!” Charlie’s voice rises, a mix of anger and bewilderment. He gestures animatedly, his hands slicing through the air. “Tonight, he wanted us to dance because it would be weird if we didn’t, and I told him that I don’t dance." His brow furrows, and he feels the heat of embarrassment flood his cheeks as he recalls how he fumbled on the dance floor. “So he had me stepping on his fucking feet! He literally swept me off my feet!” His voice wavers, cracking under the weight of his emotion. Tears brim in his eyes again, and he swipes angrily at them, leaving a faint streak on his cheek.

Neil chuckles softly, a sound that feels both comforting and maddening in this moment. “That bastard.”

“He is! He totally is!” Charlie’s frustration spills over, and he paces back and forth, his hands raking through his hair again, tugging at the ends as if that might pull the thoughts from his mind. “I was supposed to woo him—I told him as much when we agreed to this stupid thing—and then he goes and makes me a playlist and he picks me up from class with flowers! And you, you dressed him up as Casper for Halloween?!” His voice rises in pitch, a mixture of disbelief and hurt, his body tense, the muscles in his jaw clenched tight.

Neil at least has the decency to blush, the color creeping up his neck and dusting his cheeks as he scratches the back of his head, a sheepish grin spreading across his face. “Yeah, sorry about that. I couldn’t help myself.”

“You’re not sorry!” Charlie shoots back, his arms crossed tightly over his chest, posture rigid with indignation.

“Oh, c’mon! Like you didn’t do the exact same thing with Todd!” Neil counters, leaning forward slightly, a playful glint in his eye.

“Well, you’re welcome.” Charlie rolls his eyes, but a reluctant smile tugs at his lips. Neil raises his eyebrows pointedly, but Charlie's expression quickly shifts to one of mock anger. “But like—Casper, Neil? That was pure torture!”

“In my defense,” Neil says, holding up his hands in a placating gesture, “I thought Knox would look hilarious with the blond hair dye. I didn’t expect him to look as good as he did.”

“He looked so fucking good,” Charlie moans, burying his face in his hands, his shoulders slumping in defeat. He feels a rush of heat as he recalls Knox’s effortless charm, the way his eyes sparkled, his breath brushing against Charlie's skin. “I was this close to just—jump him, you know?” He lifts his head slightly, his eyes wide with frustration and longing, and Neil can’t help but chuckle.

“Oh, I bet,” Neil replies, shaking his head, amusement dancing in his features. He leans back against the couch, arms crossed, his posture relaxed but still attentive, fully engaged in Charlie’s emotional unraveling. “Charlie, have you talked to Knox? About how you feel?”

Charlie hesitates, the question hanging in the air like a heavy weight. He shifts in his seat, running a hand through his hair, the gesture betraying his unease. “No,” he admits, his voice barely a whisper, the fear of vulnerability tightening its grip on him. “And I’m not going to, either.” He watches as Neil opens his mouth to protest, holding a hand up to cut him off before he has a chance to speak. “You should’ve seen him at the party. Once Chris showed up, his face literally lit up. There’s no point in burdening him with my feelings.”

“Your feelings are not a burden.” Neil’s voice is steady, his brows knitting together slightly.

"For Knox they'll be. And I won't do that to him," Charlie’s hands clench into fists on his lap, the nails digging into his palms, an instinctive reaction to the ache in his chest.

“Alright, but there’s no reason to keep the charade up, especially if it’s only serving to hurt you,” Neil counters, his tone firm yet gentle.

“You’re telling me I should break up with him?” Charlie asks, his voice cracking at the end.

Neil offers him a sympathetic smile. “It’s fake, Charlie.”

“Right, you’re right,” Charlie says quitely, the weight of realization

crashing down on him. He needs to break up with Knox.

It's fake Charlie.

It's fake.

Charlie rubs a hand over his face, and for a moment he feels utterly lost.

Ooh, love, ooh, Loverboy (derogatory)

Chapter Summary

> Hey, lovely people! October is here, and so is the seventh chapter of this story! Are you guys as excited as am I to see what's going to happen next? This is the last chapter that I had outlined before I started posting, so everything you read from this point onward is not planned, like at all! We are winging it, and we hope it's going to lead somewhere good! Anyway, we don't have to worry about any of that right now! Let's focus on chapter 7! As always, let me know what you think in the reviews!!

Knox is ten years old the first time he gets his heart broken.

It's Saturday morning, and Knox has just returned from lacrosse practice, his hair still damp with sweat and the earthy scent of grass and dirt clinging to his clothes. All he can think about is a hot shower, a quick snack, and maybe some time with his PlayStation. As he steps through the front door, the sound of his parents' voices echoes down the hallway, pulling a frown to his lips. He glances at his wristwatch, surprised to see his mom is usually in her office at this time.

Oh well.

Shrugging off the feeling of unease, he slings his duffel bag over his shoulder and heads toward the stairs.

"Knox, is that you, honey?" Dad asks and Knox stops mid-step.

"Yeah, it's me," he says, one hand resting on the banister, the other holding on to the strap of his bag.

"Can you come in here? We need to talk," dad says, and there's something in his tone that makes Knox's stomach twist.

"I need to take a shower," he yells back, taking another step up the stairs.

"You'll do that later, sweetheart," mom's voice joins in, and know Knox feels his stomach tangle into a knot.

"But-"

"Now, Knox." Mom's voice cuts in, sharp but tired, and Knox knows better than to argue. He jumps the last few steps down and walks into the living

room, the duffel bumping against his hip.

Knox stops past the entrance, eyebrows rising high enough to get lost behind his wet hair. All three of his sisters are sitting on one of the couches.The twins, Luna and Stella, are on their phones, looking bored, but Lyla—the youngest of the four—has her hands clasped tightly in her lap, pressing them together. Their parents stand on opposite sides of the room, like the space between them is intentional. His dad stares out the window, hands on his hips, while his mom rubs the back of her neck, as if trying to smooth out the tension.

Knox's stomach twists even harder.

It's Stella who spots him first, her gaze lifting from her phone by chance. "Good, you're here," she says flatly, and at that moment, the atmosphere in the room seems to shift. Everyone's attention snaps to Knox. He can feel all their eyes on him, the weight of it like a vice around his chest. He rolls on the balls of his feet, feeling his anxiousness spike.

Their dad smiles up at him, sad and tired. "Take a seat, Knox," he says softly, inkling his head toward the couch.

Knox hesitates, then lowers himself onto the edge of the couch opposite his sisters, dropping the duffel bag by his feet. Their mom's eyes are red-rimmed, as if she's been crying, but she's avoiding his gaze. Knox shifts uncomfortably, glancing between his parents, waiting for someone to speak.

Luna lets out an exaggerated sigh, tossing her head back dramatically, her blond hair spilling like a waterfall over the back of the couch. "Can we finally start now? We have other things to do."

"Luna," their mom snaps, her voice sharp but low, as if it's all she can muster. Luna rolls her eyes in response.

Knox's heart thuds in his chest, heavy and uneven. He sits, confused and a little afraid, as his gaze bounces between his parents. "What's going on?"

Their mom keeps her eyes on the floor, lips pressed together in a tight line. She glances at his dad, her whole body stiff, like she's waiting for him to say something, to take the lead. The air feels heavy, like something terrible is about to fall.

"We need to tell you something," their dad starts, coming closer to the couch Knox is sitting on. "We need to talk to you all about something important." His voice is careful, deliberate.

Their mom tries to speak, her voice barely holding steady. "Your father and I…" she begins, but her words falter. She presses a trembling hand to her mouth, her shoulders shaking slightly.

Knox's heart hammers in his chest, each beat growing louder in his ears.

Their dad takes a deep breath, his voice steady but soft. "Your mom and I have decided to get a divorce."

Knox stares at his dad, blinking.

Divorce.

The word doesn't make sense at first. It doesn't belong in their house.

"What?" Knox's voice cracks.

Across from him Stella finally drops her phone onto her lap with an exaggerated sigh. She pulls the hood of her sweatshirt over her head, folding her arms across her chest. But there's a tightness in her jaw and Knox sees her nails digging into the skin of her thumb.

Luna shifts in her seat, uncomfortably, pulling both her feet up on the couch and wrapping her arms around them. She stares at their parents, gaze sharp, a vein ticking on her forehead, and Knox can see the storm brewing inside of her.

Lyla is the first one to break the silence. She's usually so vibrant and loud that Knox gets whiplash by the softness of her voice as she asks, "Does this mean we won't all live together anymore?" her big brown eyes filling with tears.

Her question shatters the fragile silence, and Knox feels like the floor is crumbling beneath him. He looks at her—her brown eyes wide and wet — and suddenly he can't breathe.

Their mom swallows hard, blinking back her own tears. "No, sweetheart. We won't."

Lyla's face crumples, her bottom lip trembling as she pulls it between her teeth, worrying it until it's red. Her fingers twist the hem of her shirt around her knuckles, tight enough that her hands begin to pale. Their mother sits beside Knox on the couch, her touch gentle but deliberate as she rests a careful hand on his shoulder.

Knox flinches, jerking away so quickly that he almost tumbles off the edge

of the cushion. His skin prickles where she'd touched him, an angry heat rising up his neck. He barely registers the way his mother pulls her hand back, hovering near him, uncertain.

"I don't want us to split up," Lyla whispers, her voice thin as tears spill down her cheeks.

The words hang in the air, and Knox's shoulder burns with the lingering weight of their mother's touch, even though she's no longer touching him.

Stella rolls her eyes again, but there are tears stubbornly clinging in her eyelashes now. "Great," she mutters under her breath, more to herself than anyone else. She sinks deeper into the couch, curling in on herself. "Fucking perfect."

Their dad steps forward, hands out like he wants to comfort someone but doesn't know who. "We're sorry," he says softly, but his voice wavers. "Your mom and I… our relationship is not working anymore."

"Why can't you just fix it?" Lyla's voice is filled with misery. "You're always fixing things," she adds, her eyes cutting to their father pleadingly.

A pained look crosses their dad's face. "Some things – can't be fixed, pumpkin. We've been trying for a long time. Sometimes… love isn't enough."

"That's bullshit," Luna snaps, jumping from the couch. "You didn't even try to fix it! You're just giving up!"

"We did try," their mom says quietly, but her voice falters under the weight of her eldest daughter's anger.

Knox watches as Luna throws her hands in the air, her glare turning sharp as it cuts to their dad. "You're lying," she spits, her voice cracking. "You didn't even try. You just quit!"

"I didn't quit!" their dad fires back, and Knox flinches at the edge of anger in his voice. "It's complicated, Luna. You wouldn't understand."

"Then explain it!" Luna shouts, her desperation spilling over. "Make me understand!"

Their mom steps in, her voice soft but pleading. "Please, Luna. We're not trying to hurt you. We're doing what we think is best."

"Best for who?" Stella mutters from under her hood. "Because it's

definitely not best for us."

Knox's heart pounds harder, the noise of their voices blending into a cacophony. He wants to scream, to tell them all to stop, but he can't. He can't say anything. His skin feels too tight, his breath too shallow.

Something flashes in his periphery, and then Lyla is on her feet. "I hate you! I hate all of you!" she screams, her body shaking with the power of her high-pitched voice. The words echo in the room around them, and before anyone gets the chance to say anything she bolts out of the room.

Their parents exchange a look, their dad nodding as their mother quickly stands up to go after her, calling her name softly. Lyla's steps never falter, pounding up the stairs, and soon enough they hear the sound of a door slamming on the second floor.

Stella snorts bitterly. "Yeah, this checks; Just – go after her, like you always do." Her knees press into her chest, the hood hiding half her face. "As if today wasn't shitty enough."

Their dad sighs, low and deep, a hand running through his hair again. His gaze sweeps over them, stopping briefly on Knox, but then shifting away quickly, like he can't afford to hold eye contact. "Lyla is very young, Stella. You're not being fair," he mutters.

"Fair?" Luna fires back, hands coming to rest on her hips. "You want to talk bout fair? What is fair in any of this, Dad?" She demands, stepping up to him. "You just… you just decide to break up, break everything up and we have to – what? Smile and nod? Like nothing's wrong?"

Knox feels frozen in place, like he's watching the scene unfold from outside his own body. His throat is too thick, like he's swallowed a lump and whatever words build up in his tongue they never make it past his lips. His duffel is still lying by his feet, the weight of it the only anchor he has right now on Earth. If it suddenly disappeared Knox is certain he'd fly into outer space.

Their dad rubs his face with both hands, as he takes a seat on the edge of the coffee table. "I know this is hard for all of you," he says softly, and Knox instinctively shakes his head, because no; no, he doesn't. "I don't expect you to understand it right away – or maybe, ever."

Luna starts pacing back and forth, and Knox follows her with his gaze, watching as she clenches her fists at her sides, muttering curses under her breath. "This is bullshit," she repeats, shaking her head. "You guys think you can just drop this bomb on us and then everything will go back to

normal?"

"There is no normal, anymore," Stella mutters from behind her, and Luna stops dead in her tracks. Her shoulders slump, abruptly, as if the fight has drained out of her. Their dad looks between the twins, searching for anything akin to a soothing word, but he comes up blank.

Knox's heart beats so fast inside his chest as if it's trying to break out of it. He sits there, in the shambles of what his family used to be, and it's all too much.

It's too much.

He stands up so quickly a wave of dizziness washes over him, but he doesn't hesitate. He trips over his duffle bag, the strap catching his foot, and for a moment, he fears he'll crash to the floor. In a quick instinctive move, he jumps over the offending bag, heart racing. He knows they're all watching him, but Knox stays silent, overwhelmed by it all and desperate to escape. He races up the stairs, barely aware of the steps beneath him, until he bursts into his bedroom. The door slams shut behind him, and the sudden silence that follows is deafening.

Knox stumbles into his closet, curling up in the corner among the blankets and duvets. The tears he's been holding back finally break free, hot and fast, spilling over his cheeks.

In the quite of his room Knox cannot hear his sisters' voices, or his parents attempt at calming words. In the quite of his room Knox can only hear the sound of his heart going into overdrive as it breaks and spills all over his chest cavity.

Because sometimes love is not enough.

And now there's no normal anymore.

Knox is not having such a great day.

He wakes up with his head throbbing, as if someone is banging a hammer on the inside of his skull. He groans, the sound scrapping his throat painfully, and he blindly reaches for the sweater he keeps by the feet of his bed, pulling it over his head. The soft fabric offers a

little comfort, but not enough to shake the haze that clouds his mind. His legs feel unsteady as he stands, his hand automatically running through his messy hair, trying—and failing—to smooth it out.

His feet carry him to the shared bathroom on the second floor and as soon as his eyes fall on the mirror he winces. Dark circles hang beneath his eyes, heavy and shadowy, and his skin looks almost translucent, paler than he looked as Casper on Halloween. Knox rubs a hand over his face and sighs before stepping into the shower. The hot water, usually his salvation, only makes things worse—he relaxes too much, sinking into it until his eyelids droop. By the time he steps out, he's barely awake.

He doesn't bother drying his hair, simply running a towel through it a couple of times. He puts on back his pajamas, his body feels too heavy for anything else, and he shuffles downstairs in search of his friends

No one is the kitchen, which is understandable considering it's past noon. His stomach churns as he thinks about food, so he bypasses the fridge and heads straight for the living room. He finds Pitts and Todd there, curled on either side of the same couch. Todd is scribbling something on a notebook, sitting in a position that cannot be safe for his spine. Pitts is reading a book, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Knox doesn't even hesitate. He throws himself between them, sprawling across the couch with his head landing on Pitts' chest and his legs stretching out into Todd's lap. Todd silently shifts to accommodate him, barely breaking his focus, while Pitts simply glances down, an amused smile tugging at his lips.

For a while, no one speaks. The house is quiet, save for the occasional scratch of Todd's pen and the soft rustle of Pitts turning a page.

"Pittsie," Knox mumbles finally, his voice a pitiful whine. He stretches out further, his fingers grabbing a handful of Pitts' t-shirt like a lifeline.

"Yes, darling?" Pitts replies, his voice soft and indulgent. He always humors Knox when he's nursing a brutal hangover.

"I feel like my brain is trying to leak out of my ears."

Pitts chuckles lightly, patting Knox's head. "I did try to get that gin away from you last night."

"But I didn't give it up?"

“You didn’t give it up, darling, no. You were dead-set on finishing the whole thing.”

“Last night Knox was an idiot,” Knox sighs, rubbing his temples, as if it will help to alleviate the dull ache lingering beneath his skin.

“Last night Knox was misguided,” Pitts says kindly, though the smirk on his face says otherwise.

Knox leans back into the cushions, letting the softness envelop him as he snuggles further into Pitts, craving the comfort of his friend’s presence. “You’re so nice to me, Pittsie. I don’t deserve you.”

“I’ll remind you of that the next time you refuse to let me copy your European Civ notes,” Pitts teases, raising an eyebrow.

Knox lets out a dramatic sigh, his exhaustion momentarily forgotten. “You can always copy my notes, Pitts. I’ll even take your LSATs for you!”

Pitts laughs, shaking his head. “Easy there, *yakiri*, stop making hangover promises,” he says, giving Knox a gentle pat on the head. “Unless you want to end up writing my thesis.”

“Let’s not talk about essays,” Todd mutters from the other end of the couch, his voice low and weary. “Please. I’m begging you.”

Knox smiles despite the pounding in his head. “Alright, Anderson, whatever your heart desires.”

“You seem to be in a mood,” Pitts comments, his brow furrowing slightly in concern as he glances at Knox’s disheveled appearance, hair tousled and eyes slightly bloodshot.

“Whatever do you mean, my oldest and dearest friend?”

“Hey!” Todd exclaims, feigning hurt, but he’s smiling when Knox looks at him, his messy hair falling into his eyes.

Knox mirrors it. “You are also my dearest friend, Todd; I’m a big boy, I can have two dearest friends."

“This, this is exactly what I mean,” Pitts says, pointing at Knox with a knowing look. His eyes flick over Knox’s sprawled-out form. “You’re cuddly, Overstreet. And you’re never cuddly.”

Knox’s stomach does a little flip, a mix of embarrassment and

something else he can't quite identify. Out of all the poets, he's never been the one to seek out physical comfort. But last night's Knox decided to down an entire bar's worth of gin, and today's Knox is paying the price. Now, he just wants to feel close to someone.

"You were ridiculously drunk last night," Todd comments, his voice still low and weary as he scribbles in his notebook.

Knox frowns "You saw me last night? After the party?"

"Oh, we all saw you last night," Pitt says, smirk pulling at his lips.

Knox sputters for a minute. "What does that mean?"

"Let's just say," Pitts begins, smirking, "you did not go quietly into the night."

Knox blinks, trying to piece together the gaps. "That doesn't tell me anything, Gerard."

"Oh, so it's Gerard, now?" Pitts teases.

Knox groans, rubbing his temples "Please, what – what happened last night? I wasn't *that* drunk!"

"You seriously don't remember, do you?" Todd asks, finally meeting his gaze. Knox shakes his head, dread growing in his already queasy stomach.

Pitts taps his chin thoughtfully. "Let's see… there was dancing –"

"Dancing?" Knox interrupts, flashes of the party flooding back to him. Dancing with Charlie. Then Chris. His stomach twists at the thought.

"Yes, and – um, what did you call it Todd?" Pitts pauses, thinking, then snaps his fingers. "Ah, yes. An impassioned declaration of love."

Knox groans, burying his face in his hands. "No. No, no, no."

"Oh, yes," Todd says, his grin widening. "It was quite moving, actually. You all had just returned from the Danbury's –"

"So, it happened after the party?" Knox asks, alarm growing.

"Yes, right after," Pitts continues. "You just stood on the kitchen table and—"

“The kitchen table?” Knox cuts in, voice rising in horror.

“Yup. Climbed right on top and declared, ‘I am in love!’” Todd chimes in.

“Um who – who was I declaring it to?” Knox asks, feeling his throat growing thick.

“Well, you never said, but I’m guessing Charlie,” Pitt says, patting him on the shoulder. A noncommittal sound makes it out of Knox's mouth and his friends laugh, thinking he is embarrassed.

Knox drags a hand over his face, trying to hide his rising panic. The pounding in his head seems to intensify, as if trying to keep up with the whirl of disjointed memories. He forces out a laugh, though it feels awkward in his throat. “Oh God. Please tell me I didn’t fall off the table.”

Pitts tilts his head, feigning thoughtfulness. “Well… you did try to jump down dramatically.”

“And?”

Todd offers him a sympathetic smile, but the intention gets lost when he ends up giggling anyway. “You slipped and landed on Charlie.”

For a second, Knox’s mind blanks, and then it’s like a flicker of something surfaces—a vague memory of warmth, of colliding bodies. He swallows hard, but he’s quick to brush it off, chalking it up to the alcohol. “Oh.” He forces a smile, trying to match the casual banter, but his stomach gives an odd flip he can’t quite explain. *It’s fine,* he tells himself. “So, did I, like, crush him or something?”

“Nah, he was fine,” Pitts says with a grin, patting Knox on the shoulder. “Honestly, I think he was more worried about you.”

“Right. Of course.” Knox laughs again, this time with a little more ease, though the strange flutter in his stomach doesn’t go away.

Probably the lingering effects of too much gin.

Knox’s heart skips a beat. His throat feels tight, panic mixing with something he can’t quite name. He sits up, raking his hands through his hair. “Has ugh... has either one of you seen Charlie?” he asks, trying to sound casual, eyes flickering between them.

“Well, since classes are out, he’s probably at football practice.”

“Yeah, football practice. That makes sense.” Knox nods, a little too quickly. “You’re so smart, Pittsie.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Pitts grins, but his expression shifts, more thoughtful. “Knox?”

“Mhm?”

“This thing with you and Charlie, it’s serious, huh? You really like him?”

Knox blinks at him, caught off guard. “Apparently I’m in love with him,” he jokes, hoping the light tone hides the way his chest tightens just a little. He glances at Todd, who has once again started scribbling in his notebook but looks like he’s paying more attention than before. Pitts seems satisfied with the response, offering him a quick pat on the back.

“Good, cuz I think he really likes you too.”

Knox doesn’t know why that makes his heart skip a beat.

It’s several hours later, and Knox is still not having a particularly good day. The sun has long since set behind the horizon, dark clouds gathering as if echoing his mood. The streetlamps outside flicker on, casting a dull glow through the windows, and a light wind picks up, rustling the trees. Anyone without a pressing reason to be outside has retreated indoors by now.

Anyone but Charlie, that is.

Knox has been loitering in the living room for the past how many hours, alternating between absentmindedly scrolling through his phone, and pretending to have enough presence of mind to leaf through his gender studies notes that he needs to go through before the next meeting with his thesis advisor.

He’s just set his phone down with a sigh when the front door opens and Neil walks in. Knox’s heart jumps. He throws off the quilt draped across him, feet tangling in it as he scrambles to stand. “Neil!” he calls out, immediately regretting the volume. His voice sends a sharp throb through his skull, but it does the trick, and Neil pauses near the staircase, turning back to face him.

“Yes, Knoxie?” Neil asks, the nickname rolling off his tongue in that light, familiar tone of his.

“Hey, hi,” Knox sounds breathless, and he offers Neil a wobbly smile as he presses a hand against his chest. It doesn’t reach his eyes, and Neil tilts his head questioningly. “Have you seen Charlie today? Like at all? Because he was gone by the time I woke up, which is freakish because I think he had more to drink than any of us. And I know he had football practice, but that was around noon-ish.”

The words tumble off his mouth, rushed and jumbled together, but Knox can’t help it. He feels his heart hammer inside his chest, and he presses his palm harder against it, as if he can physically slow it down.

Neil frowns thoughtfully, tapping his chin. “I think he had a shift at the radio station?” there’s a questioning lilt in his voice, but the expression on his face doesn’t match it.

“Another one?” Knox’s eyes widen. “At this rate, he’s going to end up running the damn place by next month.” He tries to laugh, but it sounds hollow even to his own ears.

“Why don’t you give him a call?” Neil suggests, conversationally and for some reason it tags at Knox’s heart.

He fidgets with the hem of his sweater, fingers twisting the soft fabric. “That’s the thing - I did, but it just kept ringing,” Knox says, and he can’t stop the frustration that seeps into his tone.

Neil studies him from a second, his eyes flickering all over Knox’s face and he tries not to squirm. “Okay, so call him again.”

“I don’t – I don’t want to be a nag,” Knox hesitates, knowing how it will come out, and sure enough Neil’s answer confirms him.

His friend reaches over, a hand landing gently on Knox’s shoulder, grounding him. “Knox, you’re his boyfriend. I don’t think he’s going to think you’re being a nag.”

The word “boyfriend” hits him like a slap, and Knox’s stomach churns. He drops his gaze to the floor, biting the inside of his cheek. It’s funny —he’s always been comfortable with this whole fake dating thing, but hearing Neil say it now, when he’s not sure where Charlie even is, feels different. “Right,” he mutters, voice quiet.

Neil doesn’t move, his hand squeezing Knox’s shoulder gently. “Hey, is

everything alright?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?" Knox forces a chuckle, trying to brush off the weird feeling, but Neil doesn't budge.

"You just got real quiet on me… Are you sure you're fine? I know we joke that Charlie's my best friend, but I love you too, Knoxie. You can talk to me." There's an earnestness in Neil's voice that doesn't help Knox's weak stomach.

Knox allows a smile to curl at the corner of his lips, "I know that, idiot."

Neil narrows his eyes playfully; Knox can see the concern shinning in them. "I'm an idiot because I love you?"

Knox smirks, grateful for the shift in tone, but it doesn't quite ease his mind. "Among other things."

Neil lets out a huff of exaggerated offense, stepping back. "You and Charlie are turning into the same person. It's eerie."

Knox laughs lightly, but it's half-hearted, as his mind flashes to last night's party, to Chris interrupting him and Charlie dancing, to Charlie kissing Ginny Danbury… Maybe that's where Charlie's been all day—maybe Knox has been slowly losing his mind while his fake boyfriend has been out on a date with a very real potential girlfriend.

Well, good for him.

"So, are you gonna call him?" Neil asks, running a hand through his hair, as if reading Knox's uncertainty.

Knox hesitates before shaking his head. "Nah, he'll come home eventually," he says, shrugging, though his voice doesn't carry the confidence he wants it to. He offers Neil a tight smile, but the unease from earlier refuses to budge.

Knox's answer hangs in the air, and Neil looks like he wants to say something, but for once, he doesn't push. Instead, he gives Knox a small, understanding nod. "Alright. But if you need anything, you know where to find me."

Knox forces another smile.. "Yeah, thanks."

Neil lingers for a second longer before finally turning to head upstairs,

the soft thud of his footsteps echoing in the quiet house. Knox watches him go, but the tension in his chest doesn't ease. His phone still sits on the coffee table, the screen dark and silent, as if mocking his indecision. Massaging a hand on his nape, Knox walks around the couch, his gaze flicking toward his phone. He hesitates for a moment before snatching it up and quickly shoving it into his pocket, as if keeping it out of sight will stop the temptation to call Charlie again.

Charlie will come back when he gets back.

Knox is *definitely* not moping around. No, he's just practicing a little bit of self-care. After all, the hangover from last night is still gnawing at him, and if there's one thing Knox Overstreet knows, it's that he deserves comfort after a long day of *not* thinking about Charlie.

So he is not moping – he's not brooding either. Okay, so what if he's already retread to his bedroom, door firmly shut to the outside world, his favorite '80s ballads playlist turned up loud enough to drown out any thoughts? Is he not allowed to indulge in some *refined* music? And okay, maybe he hasn't had any dinner, but that's just a side effect of nursing a hangover.

And yeah, fine - he may have borrowed all the available candles in the house, and they may or may not all be now filling his bedroom with a soft flickering glow. And okay, maybe he sprayed that jasmine room spray that Stella had gifted him at the beginning of the term *a bit* excessively all over his pillow and comforter. The air is thick with the calming scent, and while he never fully believed in its supposed nerve-calming properties, it does seem to be working right now. And sure, he's changed into his comfiest sweater—the one that's at least two sizes too big and practically swallows him whole—and slipped into his most worn-out pair of jeans. But so what?

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Lyla's voice whispers; *You're allowed to take care of yourself, Knox*, and he nods because he knows he is. Knox deserves this—candles, mood lighting, big sweaters, and all.

Knox is *fine*.

In fact he is in the middle of hitting a high note in *Total Eclipse of the Heart* when his bedroom door swings open. He's too immersed in his performance—standing on his bed, the comforter draped over his shoulders like a cape, or maybe a particularly heavy veil, a comb doubling as a microphone gripped tightly in his hands—to notice the

figure slipping into his room.

“So it is you and not a cat dying from food poisoning. Good to know.”

Knox startles and nearly trips off his bed, managing to save himself last minute by bracing his body against the wall. “Char,” he breathes, and if it comes out a bit too airy it’s because he’s been singing his lungs out.

“Hey, Knoxious,” Charlie greets, but he doesn’t meet his eyes and there’s something in his voice that Knox cannot entirely pinpoint. He feels a prickle of unease at the back of his neck.

“Where have you been? I tried calling you.” Knox tries to keep his voice light, but the words come out a little more insistent that he intended.

Charlie shrugs, still avoiding eye contact. “I was… out.”

“Yeah, I noticed. I tried calling you,” Knox repeats, a little slower this time, the underlying concern creeping into his voice.

Charlie sighs, running a hand through his hair in a gesture that feels distracted. “Yeah, sorry. I guess I never looked at my phone after practice was done.”

“How did it go?” Knox asks, searching Charlie’s face for any signs of what’s really going on.

“Mhm? Oh, it went well, yeah,” Charlie responds, but it’s like he’s on autopilot “We’re definitely crushing Penn State for the cup, hands down.”

“Good, good…” Knox trails off, sliding down the wall he is leaning against, and sitting on his bed. Charlie is still standing awkwardly in his doorway. It feels wrong, seeing Charlie so uncomfortable in his space. “Hey, are you alright?”

Charlie’s face flickers with something, but it’s gone so fast Knox isn’t sure he even saw it.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he shoots back, the question sharp.

Knox’s eyes widen, and he hesitates. “I don’t know. You seem…” His sentence trails off as he catches the look on Charlie’s face, the tension

setting his heart racing. Charlie's mood feels like a storm cloud, crackling with static, barely contained.

Charlie's jaw clenches, his words sharp and pointed when he speaks again. "I seem? What? Finish your sentence, Knox."

There's an edge to Charlie's voice now, a defensiveness that makes Knox feel like he's just stepped on a landmine. The air between them tightens, thick with something unspoken. It reminds Knox too much of last night, when Charlie had snapped at him after that kiss with Ginny —

Ginny.

The image of Charlie and Ginny flashes in his mind again—her hands on Charlie's shoulders, Charlie's lips on hers. Knox's chest tightens. Could that be it? Could something have happened between them, something that's left Charlie this irritable and distant? Or maybe…

Is it me? Knox's mind spins around itself. Maybe it's something *he* did, something *he* said. He wracks his brain, trying to think back, searching for the moment that drove Charlie away, that made him avoid Knox for weeks now.

Knox itches to ask, to finally figure a piece of the puzzle, but his stomach swims with anxiety, and he is *too weak, too weak, too weak* and so his next words stumble out, sharp and defensive and clumsy; "Why are you being so aggressive?"

"I am not!" Charlie snaps, his hand coming down on Knox's desk with a loud smack. The sound reverberates through the quiet room, making the candles flicker. Knox flinches despite himself. "Shit, I didn't mean to yell," Charlie says quickly, but the apology feels hollow, like he's trying to smooth things over without really addressing the tension.

Knox tries to swallow the knot forming in his throat. "It's alright," he lies through his teeth, and Charlie doesn't push, doesn't question him, like he usually would. That only makes Knox feel worse, like the ground between them is suddenly uneven, shifting.

Charlie sighs again, rubbing a hand over his face. "I think I'm going to head to the shower and then go to bed."

Knox nods, feeling inexplicably heavy all of a sudden. "You must be tired."

“Yeah.”

“Yeah…” Knox echoes, unsure what else to say. There’s a thick silence hanging between them, pushing on him from every side, and Knox just wants Charlie gone from his room.

Still when Charlie turns to leave, hand gripping the doorknob in a much tighter hold than necessary, Knox stops him. His voice comes out softer than he’d expect, a hesitant plea he can’t fully explain.

“Char, we are alright. Right?”

For a moment Knox sees Charlie hesitate, sees the way his shoulders tense like he’s bracing for something. But when Charlie finally turns back, his expression is unreadable.

“Yeah, we’re fine, Knox.”

Knox.

Not Knoxious, or Knoxie or even Knoxalicious – which dear god, is such an abomination of his name.

Just plain, Knox.

The way Charlie says it, so formal, so distant—it twists something inside of him. He isn’t sure why it makes his stomach ache, but it does. The room feels colder now, despite the warm glow of the candles. Knox swallows hard, watching Charlie leave, the door clicking shut behind him with a quiet finality.

Knox sinks into his mattress pulling the comforter tightly around himself like a shield. Bonny Tyler fades into Meatloaf's *I'd Do Anything For Love*, the dramatic lyrics bouncing off the walls of his room.

What happened to Knox-time?

Yeah, you were taking care of yourself!

Yeah, Knox, fuck him.

His sisters’ voice blend together in his mind and Knox nods, despite none of them being in the room with him. *Yeah, fuck him,* he repeats under his breath, though his voice cracks around the words, sounding far too miserable for the sentiment.

His throat tightens as he rubs a hand over his face, trying to steady

the storm of emotions that have been brewing since Charlie walked out. The glow of the candles flickers on the walls, casting shifting shadows, but it only makes the room feel more claustrophobic, more lonely. He draws a shaky breath, his fingers curling around his phone as if it's a lifeline. Absentmindedly, Knox unlocks it, his thumb moving mechanically, scrolling mindlessly through apps, but his heart twitches at every new post he sees about last night's party and he swiftly logs off. He taps his fingers against the screen.

He needs to fill the silence with something besides music.

Before he can stop himself, his thumb clicks on the contacts icon, and without a second thought, he presses the call button.

It only rings twice before Chris answers.

"Chris? Hey!" Knox blinks at his ceiling, the shock too prominent to mask in his voice. Chris had picked up so quickly, almost like she'd been waiting, and somehow that surprises him more than it should.

"Hi… Why do you sound so surprised?" Chris's voice is light, but there's a hint of confusion.

Knox lets out a soft, awkward laugh, seeing the shadows of the candles dance on the walls. "I guess I just didn't expect you to pick up," he says opting for honesty.

"Why wouldn't I?" Chris's voice is warm, teasing, and Knox can almost picture the quirk of her eyebrow.

Knox's fingers find the loose thread on his sweater again, his heart pounding a little faster than it should. He twirls the thread around his finger, the fabric suddenly too tight around his chest.

"Because a month ago you wouldn't have."

There's a pause on the line, and Knox fiddles with a loose thread on his sweater, heart pounding a little faster than it should.

"A month ago, you were just a guy making googly eyes at me during Civil History," Chris says, her tone light but teasing.

Knox bites the inside of his cheek, smiling despite himself. *Googly eyes,* yeah, that sounds about right. He feels his face flush, and he's grateful Chris can't see the embarrassment creeping up his neck. He rubs a hand over his face again, trying to ground himself.

“And now?” Knox asks, quieter this time, almost hesitant.

“Now you’re my friend!”

“Friend,” Knox repeats, and he doesn’t mean for his voice to sound as bitter as it does.

He pokes a hole at his comforter; Charlie put it there last year while smoking a joint during his birthday. He had been ‘not crying Knoxious, just my allergies acting up’, after a call from his father. Knox traces the hole with his fingertip, the memory tugging at something deep inside him.

“Friend is good, Knox,” Chris adds, gently drawing the line. He can feel it, can almost see her pushing him to the other side of it.

“I guess it beats being a stranger who makes googly eyes at you,” Knox says, forcing himself to go along with it, to play it cool, not to push her tonight.

Chris laughs, and the warmth in her voice seeps through the phone, straight into Knox’s chest, making his heart clench. It’s the kind of laugh that’s easy, comforting, but distant, and Knox wishes he could feel more comforted by it. “It definitely does."

Knox’s fingers rub absently over the burn hole again, but his mind drifts back to Charlie—his mood, his distance, his damn storming off. *Ginny*. What the hell was going on with Charlie? Knox swallows thickly, his chest tight with unanswered questions.

“How’s Charlie doing?” Chris asks, as if she’s reading his thoughts. “I didn’t see him much last night.”

Knox hesitates, biting the inside of his lip. His mind lingers on the image of Charlie storming out, the coldness in his voice when he said they were ‘fine’.

“Honestly, I have no idea,” he admits, voice lower, more uncertain. “He’s a bit… touchy today.”

“Something happen?” she asks, concern lacing her voice.

Knox’s stomach flips. Did something happen? He thinks back to the tension in the room earlier, the way Charlie couldn’t even look at him for most of their conversation. His throat tightens as he tries to connect the dots.

“No? I don’t think so…” he murmurs. “We didn’t talk much.”

“I didn’t know Charlie had off days,” her surprise is subtle, but clear.

Knox doesn’t respond right away. He stares at the ceiling, tracing the cracks in the plaster with his eyes. *Charlie doesn’t have off days* – not like this, not with him.

And yet, lately, it’s felt like there’s an entire ocean of distance between them,

“Knox?” Chris’ voice pulls him back to the present.

“Mhmm?”

“I think we should hang up, or I’m going to fall asleep on you.”

Knox exhales slowly, realizing how late it’s gotten, how the weight of the day has started to press down on him too. “Yeah, me too.”

“Alright.”

“Right.”

A beat passes, and Knox wonders if she has indeed fallen asleep.

“Knox?” Chris’ voice softens.

“Yes, Chris?”

“I really like being your friend.”

Knox’s breath catches in his throat. He blinks, his heart heavy with the words she leaves unsaid, the *don’t mess it up* lingering in the air between them. But it resounds clear in his mind and it leaves a bitter aftertaste in his mouth. He forces a smile even though Chris can’t see it.

“Thank you Chris. That’s very kind of you.”

Chris snorts, half-amused. “Oh, shut up, Overstreet.”

When the call ends, Knox lets his phone drop onto the bed beside him. He stares at the ceiling again, his thoughts spinning, his heart feeling both full and hollow at the same time. For a second, he lets himself imagine what it would be like if things were different—with Charlie, with Chris, with everything.

But then he forces the thought away, burying it beneath the weight of reality.

He's *fine*.

I must be a 109 (seriously Elvis?)

Chapter Notes

> Hello, beautiful people! I don't have much to say about this chapter... I did change the ending like four times, because Knox kept insisting, and originally he was going to be way more messed up with the painkillers, but I'm keeping the ultra chaotic version of Knox for later. So, for now, enjoy and let me know your thoughts in the comments!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox is thirteen years old the second time he gets his heartbroken.

His parents have been officially separated for two years now. He doesn't think about it much anymore; it's just part of the background noise. No, Knox doesn't think about the awkward family dinners, or the split holidays, or having two houses but no home. None of that is important.

What is important is that he's currently in his final year of middle school, he has grown five inches in the past two months, and he has just been named captain of the lacrosse team. But what is even more important is that Knox now has a boyfriend.

And most most importantly Knox has a date with said boyfriend today.

He's been buzzing about it for days, checking his phone constantly, rereading old texts with a dumb grin on his face, and mentally planning out how everything will go. The two of them are supposed to meet at the park in the evening, just to hang out, maybe grab a milkshake. It's nothing fancy, but to Knox, it feels monumental. This is his first real date.

Knox spends enough time in front of the mirror to get both his sisters to angrily pound their fists against the door. He emerges, sheepish, his hair looking more disheveled than it did before he'd stepped inside.

"Oh, poor lamb," Luna says, pressing a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing.

Stella has no qualms about laughing in his face and so she does. "Sweet summer child," she mocks. Knox's cheeks heat up and he glares at his sisters – or at least he tries, but he is too nervous to pull it off.

"Do you maybe need any help?" Luna suggests her eyes scanning him

critically. She glances at his wild hair before shifting her gaze to his clothes with a raised eyebrow.

Knox hesitates, but he is already running late, and maybe getting some fashion advice from his older sisters is not the worst idea in the world.

“Only if you agree to not make fun of me,” he mutters, feeling like he is going to regret it.

Stella and Luna exchange a look. “We promise,” they say in perfect unison their tone just a little too angelic.

In the end they don’t make any major changes. They insist that less is more, and so they set about fixing the most obvious issue – according to them, his hair. Luna gets it wet enough to wash out the excessive gel he’d used to tame it.

“There,” she says, stepping back, satisfied with the natural, tousled look. “See? You look human now.”

Stella isn’t as subtle. “No one is wearing t-shirts with logos anymore,” she declares, eyeing the graphic tee he’s wearing like it’s a crime against fashion. Knox manages one offended squeak, before she grabs the hem, pulling it over his head in one swift motion.

“Unless it’s a band shirt,” Luna points out and Stella snaps her fingers in agreement.

“True, but Knox only listens to grandpa radio-”

“Hey!” Knox finally interjects, his whole face red from embarrassment. “I don’t listen to grandpa radio, and I happen to like that shirt!”

“Too bad,” Stella says unfazed, “You’re wearing this instead,” she adds, throwing a plain black henley at him. Knox, already flustered, is too slow to catch it and it smacks him in the face.

“Nice reflexes, captain,” Luna teases with a grin.

Knox tugs the shirt off his face, glaring at his sisters, but he’s too stressed to dare argue anymore. He quickly shoves his arms through the henley, pulling it over hie head. When he glances in the mirror again, he looks slightly more put together, and it makes something in his stomach settle.

“You look, almost half- decent,” Stella says, sounding way too pleased with herself, arms crossing over his chest.

“This is where you say you’re thankful,” Luna says slowly, pointedly looking at him.

Knox rolls his eyes. “Thanks,” he says, messing a hand through his hair out of habit.

“Dude, you’re going to ruin it,” Stella sounds like she’s seconds away from hitting him, as she grabs at his hand pushing it down by his side.

“Aw Stella, our little brother has his first date!” Luna coos, half teasing half serious, and Knox, mortified notices the mist gathering in her eyes.

“Let’s hope he’s more responsible than you were on your first date,” Stella quips, casting a side-eye at her twin.

“Hey, don’t be mean!”

“It ain’t mean if it’s true. Oi, you –” she turns back to Knox, wagging a finger “- make smart choices, okay?”

Luna rolls her eyes. “Stellz, he’s twelve, what exactly do you think he’ll do?”

“I’m thirteen, actually,” Knox mutters, but Stella is already talking over him.

Knowing he’s probably lost their attention, as the twins start snapping at each other, Knox uses the distraction to quietly back out of the bathroom, and hastily makes his way down the stairs and out of the house.

The air is cool, when he steps outside, the sun hanging low in the sky, casting on a golden hue over everything. He makes a quick stop at the shopping center on his way to the park his heart skittering inside his chest. Knox picks up the pace, his excitement bubbling up as he approaches the park. He rounds the corner and see the familiar entrance, the swings swaying in the gentle breeze, and a few families scattered around. His stomach flutters and Knox tries to swallow his nerves.

“Hey, you made it.”

Knox blinks at the sound of Gabe’s voice, pulling him out of his thoughts. “Yes! Hey, hi,” he says, awkwardly rolling on the balls of his feet.

Gabe is all deep dimples, and blond curls tousling in the light breeze. There’s a scatter of freckles over his nose, spilling to his cheeks, and his eyes shine with the power of his smile. He takes a step forward, as if to hug

him, and Knox steels himself, heart hammering inside his chest. But then Gabe's smile falters, and he retrieves, his eyes pinning on the bouquet clasped in Knox's hand.

"What's that?" Gabe asks, raising an eyebrow as he shoves his hands into the pockets of his faded blue jeans, trying to appear casual.

"Oh?" Knox looks at the flowers, and then back at Gabe. "Um, flowers?"

Gabe's smile completely melts away, and Knox feels a pang of worry at the change in his expression. "I can see they're flowers, but why did you buy them?"

"For you?" Knox responds, his voice a bit more uncertain than he intended.

Gabe's brows furrow slightly "For me?" He shifts his weight between his feet, looking both surprised and confused.

"Yes?" Knox insists, a nervous laugh escaping him as he feels the blush rising up his neck, suddenly self-conscious under Gabe's scrutinizing gaze.

"You sound uncertain."

"And you sound upset," Knox's fingers clench around the bouquet, the stems digging into his palm.

"I'm not upset, I'm – I don't understand." Gabe runs a hand through his hair, like he's burning off nervous energy.

"What's there to not understand?" Knox presses, his heart sinking a little.

"Why did you get me flowers?" Gabe asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Because we're hanging out…" Knox stammers, trying to keep his voice steady, but he can hear the uncertainty creeping in.

"Yeah, but flowers are… I don't know, weird," Gabe's voice sounds strained, and he gives half a shrug, eyes shifting and never meeting Knox's face.

"I thought you might like them," Knox says, and he hates how small and vulnerable he sounds. Gabe shifts again, as if it's impossible for him to stay still, and Knox may not be the smartest person in his class, but he can tell that Gabe is uncomfortable.

"They're just flowers," he says, helplessly, forcing a smile, but it trembles on his lips, feeling heavy.

“Flowers make it feel like… a big deal,” Gabe mutters, his face flushing. “It’s just, it makes things serious.”

Knox’s stomach twists “But we are on a date, aren’t we?” he asks, feeling utterly lost. His fingers are numb from gripping the bouquet so tightly.

Gabe squirms under his gaze, and Knox feels a twitch of irritation bubble in his stomach. “It’s just flowers,” he reiterates, but this time there’s a hint of anger shining through his confusion.

Gabe runs a hand through his hair, his jaw jutting out as he finally meets his gaze. “Look, Knox, I like you, I really do,” he says, and his voice is earnest enough to make the tightness in Knox’s chest ease up a little. “But –” Gabe drops his gaze, scraps the tip of his sneaker against the gravel “-flowers just feel like, a lot, you know?”

Knox stomach sinks in disappointment. “Ugh, no not really,” he admits. Something in his voice makes Gabe look up, but Knox drops his gaze instantly. His teeth clamp down on his lip so that that he feels a burst of copper burn the back of his throat. “I think I’m just going to go.”

“No Knox –” Gabe reaches for him, but Knox jerks back, the flowers falling from his hands with the sudden movement.

“See you at school,” he calls over his shoulder, lowering his head as he trudges ahead.

“Knox, wait! I didn’t mean it like that!” Gabe calls after him, but Knox can’t stop the tears pricking at the corner of his eyes.

Knox doesn’t know it yet, but this is only the first heartbreak in a line of hundreds.

Knox is not having a great week.

After nursing one of his worst hangovers all Monday, dealing with that cringeworthy conversation with Charlie, and the even more mortifying phone call with Chris, Knox wakes up in the middle of the night sweating through his clothes. He takes off his sweater and he immediately regrets that decision, because as soon as the air in his room hit his exposed skin he starts shivering.

Groaning, Knox slumps forward, resting his head in his hands. His

fingers grip at his hair, and he swallows a pathetic sigh, as he swings his legs over the side of his bed. The floor feels freezing underneath his feet, and each step he takes is marked by the rhythmic clicking of his teeth. The journey takes twice as long as it should, his comforter wrapped around him like a makeshift cloak as he stumbles along.

Once in the bathroom, he manages to down some paracetamol—no water, too much effort—before dragging himself back to bed. He barely pulls the covers over him before his body gives out, exhaustion claiming him once more.

He is awakened by Todd bursting into his room, bouncing about excitedly, pulling at his curtains and dragging Knox's duvet off him. Knox makes a valiant attempt to grab it at the last second, but he is too slow. Cold air rushes over his body, and a violent shiver rips through him, making his whole frame tremble.

"Give it back," Knox mumbles, his voice hoarse, but Todd's movements suddenly still. Knox forces himself to sit up, squinting at his friend. Todd stands at the foot of the bed, wide-eyed, staring at Knox's shivering form like he's just seen a ghost.

"Hey, it's fine," Knox says, trying for a smile, but it's weak, and even he knows it doesn't land. He reaches out a hand, wanting to shake Todd out of his frozen state, but his arm feels like lead. "Todd, seriously, I'm okay."

But Todd isn't buying it. His face tightens in panic, and before Knox can stop him, Todd dashes out of the room, practically tripping over himself in his rush.

"Todd!" Knox calls after him, but his voice barely carries.

A minute later, Todd bursts back in, arms full—a thermometer, a glass of water, and more paracetamol. Knox watches, feeling slightly guilty, as Todd rushes to his side, almost spilling everything in his hands as he tries to get organized.

"You're burning up!" Todd says, breathless, eyes wide with worry as he shoves the thermometer under Knox's arm.

Knox exhales sharply through his lips, trying to dismiss him. "I'm barely warm!"

Todd checks the thermometer, his eyes growing even wider. "The thermometer reads almost 109F!"

Knox groans, too tired to even care. “And that’s hot?”

“Knox, c’mon, seriously, we need to call a doctor!” Todd’s voice is rising, panic creeping in as he stares at Knox like he might burst into flames at any moment.

“No,” Knox moans, grabbing at Todd’s wrist in a weak attempt to stop him. His grip is laughable, barely enough to sway Todd at all. “It’s just a fever, Todd, nothing to worry about.”

“A temperature of 109F is *plenty* to worry about!” Todd’s voice is almost shaking now, his words coming out rapid-fire.

Knox rolls his eyes, leaning back into his pillows, his voice barely above a murmur. “No one’s died from a fever!”

Todd gives him an incredulous look. “A lot of people did, Knox! I thought your major was in history?”

“Yeah, but like – ” Knox lets his head loll to the side, waving a hand dismissively, “that was a long time ago.”

“Exactly!” Todd retorts, frustration lacing his tone. “A long time ago, when medicine was still a new thing and people with high fever couldn’t afford going to the doctor!”

Knox groans running a hand over his face. “What is it with you and doctors all of a sudden?”

Todd crosses his arms, his face set in determination. “What is it with you and being so stubborn?”

“Okay, okay,” Knox relents, slumping further into the pillows. His hair is a messy halo around his head, sticking up at odd angles. “Why don’t you go grab Meeks?”

“What will Meeks do?” Todd asks, frustration creeping into his voice as he taps a foot against the floor.

“Well … he is premed…” Knox trails off, half-heartedly.

“So? He’ll tell you all about the properties of enzymes and your fever will drop?” Todd’s lips twist in disbelief, and Knox can’t help but roll his eyes.

“I’m not sure they study enzymes –”

“I don’t care, Knox! You need to see a doctor! I can’t believe I’m still having this conversation with you.” Todd is frustrated enough to turn around and storm off while still murmuring underneath his breath.

“No, no, Todd come back! I don’t need a doctor… Todd!” Knox calls after him, his voice strained.

Todd does come back, but like the little traitor that he is he brings reinforcements. Pitts stands at the foot of his bed, arms slightly crossed over his chest, head tilted as he regards him.

“*Nareshi*,” Pitts starts and Knox groans because if Pitts is pulling out the Yiddish card then he is screwed. “What is this I’m hearing about you refusing to see a doctor?”

“I don’t need to see a doctor,” Knox replies stubbornly, mirroring Pitts’ stance by folding his arms over his chest.

“You have a really high fever, *nudnik,*” Pitt’s tone is firm, but the corners of his mouth twitch, fighting off a smile. Pitts always gets like this whenever Knox starts acting like a brat. Not that he is currently acting like one, because he is not, he is –

Knox is fine, okay?

“And I’ve taken enough paracetamol to battle it off! Thank you for your concern, I feel very loved, but I’m fine.” Knox’s voice is shaky, and he sounds unconvincing even to himself.

“Knox,” Pitts says, his voice careful, as if trying to coax a wild animal from its den. There’s a softness in his gaze, but the worry remains, leaving Knox feeling cornered under their scrutiny. “We are calling a doctor,” Pitts continues, and it lacks Todd’s pleading tone in its finality.

Knox grits his teeth together – or at least he tries, because no matter how pressure he puts on his jaw it still feels slack, glaring at his friends. “Fine,” he concedes, the word tasting bitter in his lips. “But only if you promise to do my chores for the rest of the week when they tell me it’s just a fever.”

“*If* the doctor says it’s just a fever, then Todd will happily do your chores for the rest of the week,” Pitts says, patting Todd’s shoulder.

“Hey!” Todd exclaims, batting Pitt’s hand away, expression affronted. “That’s not fair –“ he pauses, lifting a finger as if trying to control

himself, eyes darting between Pitts and Knox, who are wearing identical smiles. “You know what?” He huffs, throwing his hands up. “No, I’m not doing this; I’m going to go call the doctor!” Without another word, he spins on his heel and rushes out, still grumbling under his breath.

Knox’s lips twitch into a shaky but genuine smile. “You almost had him,” he says, voice strained but still playful.

Pitts chuckles, leaning with his hip against Knox’s bed. “It’s so fun, riling him up! And so easy, I can’t help myself.”

“Yeah, well, don’t let Neil hear you,” Knox warns, resting his head against his pillow. His limbs feel heavy, like lead dragging him down, but he manages to crack a grin.

“No dear god, no,” Pitts groans, rolling his eyes dramatically. “Can you imagine? Someone messing up with the perfectly angelic Mr. Anderson?”

“Neil would have an aneurism,” Knox snorts, the sound turning into a wince as a wave of dizziness washes over him.

“Neil would die avenging his honor,” Pitts quips and Knox laughs, hard. He immediately regrets it when the whole room starts spinning around him. Knox grabs the end of his mattress, trying to ground himself.

“Alright there, *ziskayt?*” Pitts asks, concern creeping back into his voice, his teasing demeanor faltering.

“*Ikh bin krank*,” Knox mumbles, the Yiddish slipping out before he can stop himself.

Pitts raises an eyebrow, his smirk softening into a knowing smile. “No, kidding? You look peachy.”

“Your sarcasm is unappreciated, just so you know.” Knox replies weakly.

“And I really don’t care, just so you know,” Pitts shoots back with a grin, through his eyes betray his worry.

They banter for a while longer, their back – and -forth lightening the mood, but with each passing minute, Knox feels the control over his body slipping away. His limbs feel foreign, too heavy to move and his

vision blurs at the edges. By the time Todd returns with the doctor, Pitts is practically hovering, trying to get Knox out of bed, his voice tense as he debates driving Knox to the hospital himself. Knox barely registers any of it, sinking further into the haze, just as the door creaks open and the doctor steps in.

She strides in the room, like a woman on a mission, eyes already narrowing as she takes in his prone form. She sits on the edge of his bed, a small flashlight in her hand, grabbing Knox's chin and turning his head this way and that, unware of how it makes his stomach swim with dizziness.

"You've just finished with finals, huh?" It's formed as a question, but it's quite obvious that she's not expecting an answer. Todd, who's standing next to Pitts by the feet of Knox's bed, nods anyway, despite standing behind her. "Let me guess, you haven't slept much have you? Too much studying to catch up on, notes piling up high enough to keep you away from a couple of meals as well. Am I right?"

Knox swallows hard, his eyes avoiding her penetrating gaze.

"When was the last time you drank any water?" she asks, turning the flashlight off and crossing her arms.

"He downed an entire bottle of gin two nights ago, if that helps," Pitts speaks up. Todd's face blanches and his elbow instinctively connects with Pitts' ribs. Pitts lets a surprised breath, his eyes widening impossibly.

"Is that so?" the doctor asks, fixing Knox with a serious look.

Knox forces a humorless chuckle, his fingers griping the comforter. The doctor hums, clearly not impressed, and turns to his friends. "He's suffering from severe dehydration and fatigue. Not uncommon for students during exam season, but this level of neglect could easily spiral if left untreated." She reaches into her bag and pulls out a small vial, her movements quick and efficient. "I'll give him something to help with the discomfort and the fever. It'll knock him out for a bit, which is good – he needs rest more than anything right now."

Before he gets the chance to panic or protest, Knox feels a swift prick in his arm, and within moments, a warm wave of relief washes over him. It might be in his head, a placebo effect or whatever it's called, but the tightness in his muscles immediately lessens, and his head feels infinitely lighter.

“Make sure he gets plenty of fluids,” the doctor continues, packing up her bag and standing. “When he wakes up, he needs to start rehydrating immediately. Water, electrolytes – anything to keep his system from crashing again.” She glances at Pitts and Todd, expression hardening for a second. “And keep any alcoholic beverage away from him.”

“Yes ma’am,” they answer in unison. Her face relaxes, a small smile gracing her lips.

“You did a good job bringing me in. Keep an eye on him, and if you notice any worsening in his condition, call me immediately.”

Knox drifting in and out of the haze, catches the tail end of her words but doesn’t have the energy to respond. Instead, he feels himself sinking deeper into the warmth of the bed, his body finally relaxing as the pain melts away.

He cracks an eye open when he hears the sound of his bedroom’s door shutting. He doesn’t know what time it is, or how much time he’s spent blissfully passed out, but there’s still some light creeping through the curtain of his window. Knox feels warm all over, and he stretches lazily in his bed, his head filled with soft, white, cotton. He lets a satisfied sigh as the warmth blankets him from head to toe.

His bed dips under someone else’s weight and his muddled brain remembers that he’s not alone. Knox blinks his eyes, tries to clear his mind, but the cotton is thick, and it creates such a pleasant fog. His gaze finally focuses a little, and Charlie comes into view.

“Char,” Knox breathes, a loopy smile tugging at his lips. Charlie leans forward just enough for Knox to take in the details of his face – the sharp jawline, the tousled hair that looks annoyingly perfect, even in the dim light. There’s a flicker of something in Charlie’s eyes, something Knox can’t quite interpret through the thick fog clouding his senses.

“Hey, *boyfriend*,” Charlie’s voice carries a teasing lilt, but there’s an intensity in his face that twists something inside Knox’s body. “Heard you’ve been feeling a little under the weather.”

Knox blinks, or at least he thinks he does, but everything feels like it’s happening underwater. “I’m just… you know… taking a nap,” he mumbles, his voice as heavy as his limbs.

Charlie chuckles softly, shifting in his seat. “Yeah, well, from what

Todd's been saying, it sounds like you've been auditioning for the role of damsel in distress in one of your favorite novels."

Knox tries to laugh, but it comes out more like a wheezy exhale. "Is that some – some kind of dig at Marianne Dashwood?" His words slur a little and he knows he doesn't make much sense – Charlie is already giving him a weird look, but the cottony haze in his head makes it all click somehow.

Charlie chuckles, decides to humor him. "Sure, both you and the youngest Miss Dashwood ended up bedridden, reaping what you sowed; her after trespassing the English countryside during winter because Willoughby broke up with her, and you mistaking gin for water and skipping several meals a day."

Knox's too busy staring at Charlie to immediately catch the not so subtle dig. Charlie who looks effortlessly good in the fading light. The shadows accentuate the angles of his face, the slight curve of his lips, the way his hair falls just right, even though it shouldn't. Maybe it's the painkillers, or maybe it's just the fever warping his thoughts, but Knox is sure Charlie has no business looking that good while he feels like dying.

"Well, excuse her for being a fifteen-year-old who's brave enough to express and defend her feelings," Knox finally says, when his brain catches up. "Not everyone's favorite can hide their feelings so well that even their intended has no clue."

"Was *that* supposed to be a shot at the best female character ever written?" Charlie's voice is mock-serious, his amusement clear despite his attempt to sound offended. "You better wash your mouth before disrespecting Lady Anne Eliot, Knoxious."

Knoxious.

He never thought he'd miss the damned nickname.

Knox's grin widens, his face almost hurting from the stretch of it. He pushes himself up - it takes great effort considering his muscles feel like jelly, but he succeeds at sitting up resting his back heavily against the headboard.

"My sincerest apologies to Lady Eliot," Knox rasps, trying to curb his grin and failing. "You know how much I actually admire the depth of her feelings for Captain Wentworth."

For a bried moment, something changes in Charlie's face. His smirk fades, replaced by a softness Knox has only glimpsed before. There's a quiet intensity in his eyes, something vulnerable, and the air between them shifts.

"Always a loverboy at heart, aren't you, Knoxie?" Charlie whispers, and there's something in the air, some kind of electricity that seems to tether them to each other.

The moment hangs between them, fragile and electric, like a thread stretched too tight. Knox holds his breath, not wanting to break the spell. He's afraid to move, to speak, to do anything that might shatter whatever this is. His pulse quickens, his heart thudding softly against his ribs.

"*Totus pulcher es*," the words slip past his lips without hesitation. Charlie blinks, caught off guard, and he leans closer to him, eyes searching.

Knox's breath shutters in his throat.

"Was that – Latin?" Charlie questions and despite the fog in his brain Knox feels a sense of déjà vu. "What did you say?"

Knox opens his mouth to speak, but a sudden bout of nausea washes over him, and the room tilts violently. He presses harder into the headboard, eyes squeezing shut as dizziness takes hold.

"Knoxious? Knox, are you okay?" Charlie's voice fills with concern and his hand gripping Knox's shoulder in a steadying hold.

Knox's eyes flutter open, painfully slow, the world coming back into a blurry focus. Charlie's face hovers close, worry etched into his features.

Knox manages a weak smile, despite everything. "Hello," he whispers, his voice barely audible. He reaches out, his hand grasping at Charlie's, grounding himself with the contact. "You're absolutely beautiful," he repeats in English.

Charlie reacts instantly, pulling away so fast that he almost tumbles off the bed. It's like the words burn him. He blinks, attempting to force a smile, but it's clear he's struggling. "You're high as hell, buddy," Charlie says, shaking his head slightly, trying for casual but missing the mark. "I'm not sure you even know what you're saying."

Knox wants to protest, to tell him that he does in fact know exactly what he is talking about, but Charlie is already turning away from him, his back stiff. Knox can only see the side of his face, but he can tell there's a tension in Charlie's posture.

"Char –" he starts, reaching for him again, only to get interrupted, when Charlie drops a plate in his lap.

"Eat," Charlie says, his tone sharper than before. There's a piece of toast on it, cold and stale now, and some chips and Knox is instantly aware that he hasn't had anything to eat in more than twenty-four hours.

His stomach growls loudly, the sound resounding in the silent room. He picks up the toast but hesitates, his eyes flicking back to Charlie.

"Charlie," he begins again, his voice rough as he forces down a bite, barely tasting the dry bread.

Charlie's eyes dart to the plate. "Finish that," he mutters, softer this time, though his voice leaves no room for argument.

Knox chews slowly, his thoughts still clouded by everything unsaid between them. As the crumbs crumble in his fingers, Knox sets the half-eaten slice back onto the plate, his appetite waning as quickly as it had come. His focus drifts away from the food and back to the tension hanging thick in the air.

"You need to start taking better care of yourself, Knox," Charlie continues, sitting back down, his voice steady but edged with frustration. "You can't just go days without food, thinking you'll be fine. You're not invincible!"

Knox blinks, barely processing the change in tone. His mind is still stuck on their previous conversation, on the way Charlie had so violently pulled away from him. "Charlie," he tries, voice hoarse, "about what I said –"

Charlie cuts him off again, shaking his head more firmly this time. "No. We're not talking about that right now. You're sick, dehydrated, running a high fever – you're not in your right mind."

"I know what I'm saying," Knox protests, trying to sit up straighter. His body protests, but he pushes though. "You're beautiful, Charlie. I wasn't just –"

“Knox, stop,” Charlie snaps, and for a second, his face hardens, but his eyes betray something softer, something conflicted. “Don’t say things you’ll regret later.”

Another déjà vu washes over him, and this time it’s sharper, more painful. Knox clenches his jaw, his frustration starting to break through the fog. Charlie’s annoyance fuels his own, and Knox feels it bubbling in the pit of his belly. “Charlie, have I done something wrong? Have I said something?”

Charlie blinks caught off guard. “What?”

“You’re upset at me, you’ve been avoiding me for weeks and I –” Knox’s voice breaks, the emotion starting to overwhelm him. He presses his lips together, trying to keep his composure. “Have I done something?”

Charlie lets out a small, almost bitter scoff. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Knox’s anger flares, heat rising through his chest, the fire of it spreading until it’s licking at his throat, ready to burst out. “I deserve better than that, Char. Tell me what I did.”

“Knox –”

“No, Charlie, *please*!” Knox’s voice breaks again, and his hands tremble slightly. He fists them into the bedsheets to steady himself. “You’ve been so distant, so different, I –”

A loud buzzing interrupts him, making both of them jump. Knox’s phone, face down on the nightstand, vibrates again, insistent. He doesn’t reach for it, his gaze locked on Charlie’s.

Charlie glances at it. “You should get that,” he mutters, his voice suddenly quieter, almost an escape from the tension. Knox doesn’t move. The phone buzzes again.

“This conversation is more important.”

Charlie’s jaw tightens, but he doesn’t respond. The phone buzzes once more, louder this time, shattering whatever fragile moment was left.

“Please, just answer it,” Charlie murmurs.

Blowing a breath out through clenched teeth, Knox grabs the phone,

fully intending to reject the call. But his fingers hesitate when he sees the name flashing on his screen, his heart skipping a beat.

“It’s Chris,” he says, his surprise overtaking him and forcing the words out of his mouth.

He hears a scoff.“Then you should definitely answer it.” Charlie’s lips twitch in what might’ve been a bitter smile.

Knox hesitates, gazing between Charlie and his phone, pulse quickening in his throat. He doesn’t want to let the conversation die, but the phone keeps buzzing in his hand, and Charlie is already pulling away both physically and metaphorically.

“Please, don’t go,” Knox tries one last time, because of course he does. Charlie pauses only for a moment, his shoulders so taught, like a bow ready to fire.

“You’re not in your right mind, Knox,” Charlie repeats, his voice distant, resigned. He doesn’t turn to look at him, facing the door instead. “You need to rest. We’ll talk when you’re better.”

Before Knox can protest, Charlie slips out of the room, closing the door softly behind him. Knox feels the sting straight to his chest, his breath catching for a moment as he watches the door.

Swallowing hard, he swipes his thumb over the phone screen and brings it to his ear. He tries to draw a deep breath, but it’s shaky, barely filling his lungs.

“Hey, Chris,” it comes out fragile and uneven, and Knox blinks rapidly, attempting to recall himself.

“I heard through the grapevine that my favorite poet is bedridden, and I had to call to make sure you’re still alive,” Chris’ voice comes bubbling through the line, warm and playful. It washes over him like refreshing rain, momentarily soothing the ache inside him.

Knox sags against the headboard, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I feel better already,” he murmurs, wishing he was being honest. But the fog is still clouding his mind, and through it all Knox feels his heart constricting behind his bones. He presses his hand to his chest, as if it will help to alleviate some of the pressure there.

“You sound like shit,” Chris goes for blunt honesty, and it startles a soft chuckle out of him.

“Tell me exactly what you think, why don’t you,” he jokes weakly, his voice lacking any kind of spark.

“Hey, telling it straight is how you keep your friends on their toes,” Chris teases, but Knox’s smile falters.

Right, friend.

Knox tries to swallow, to shake the feeling, but it lingers.

“Knox?” Chris’ voice pulls him back.

“Mhm?”

“You went suddenly silent on me; thought you might’ve fainted.”

“I told you I’m already feeling better,” Knox says, though his tone doesn’t match the words. The tension from earlier is still very much present in the room, sitting there, unspoken, weighing on him like lead.

There’s a pause, a beat of silence that feels too long.

“Alright.”

“Chris?” Knox’s voice wavers, his pulse raising underneath his skin. He knows it’s the wrong time, he knows he shouldn’t ask, but the impulse is too strong, and the medication has obviously loosen his tongue.

“Yeah?”

“Do you – do you think our relationship status might ever change?”

There’s another pause on the other end of the line, long enough that Knox’s stomach twists painfully.

“Knox,” Chris’ breathes out and Knox realizes it was the wrong thing to ask. “Don’t make me answer that.”

“Please,” Knox whispers, hating how small his voice sounds all of a sudden.

Chris sighs, heavy and long. “No, Knox, I don’t see that happening,” she says finally, her voice quite but firm.

Knox had expected the answer, but it still makes his heart sink.

“Why?” he asks, voice barely above a breath.

Chris hesitates. “Knox,” the sound of his name is a soft warning, like she is trying to tread lightly around his feelings.

Knox sinks slightly in his bed, pulling the covers up to his chin, feeling a chill rush through his room. “C’mon, do a sick guy a favor, Noel,” Knox pushes, his voice cracking under the pressure of trying to keep the conversation light.

Chris sighs again, the sound weighing heavily in Knox’s ears. “I really like you, Knox, I don’t want to hurt you -I don’t want to lose…us.”

“You won’t,” Knox insists, his fingers flexing weakly around the phone, “I promise. But – Chris, I need to know.”

“Okay… Look, Knox, you’re a great guy! You’re so kind, and you’re understanding and funny and you love so loudly.”

“But?” Knox’s chest tightens, his heart beating in his throat.

“But you love so loudly Knox,” Chris repeats, her voice gentle but firm. “Your love is so intense, it bulldozes over everything else.”

Knox’s breath hitches, “You’re saying I’m too much.”

Chris doesn’t deny it. “Yes, you are, but that’s not a bad thing.”

Knox laughs and it sounds twisted, bitter and swallow. “How can it not be a bad thing?”

“It’s too much for me,” Chris admits, her voice quieter now, “I’m nothing like that. I like things to be more quiet, I hate feelings running so high, so uncontrollable. I’m not good at handling my own emotions, much less someone else’s.”

“You’re not making it any better, you know,” Knox mutters, his voice rough, his eyes burning with unshed tears.

“Well, if you stop interrupting me, I will,” Chris counters lightly, trying to ease the tension.

“Alright, alright, jeez,” Knox says, his tone softening, though the weight of Chris’ words still presses heavily on him.

Chris sighs. “Loving the way you do… it can be exhausting, Knox –”

“Chris, maybe we should hang up.”

"But it can also be exhilarating!" Chris adds quickly, her voice rising slightly, trying to salvage the conversation before it spirals. "You—Knox, you love grand gestures. You throw yourself into everything, like you're in some epic romance! You love the drama, the tension— " She laughs lightly, though there's a hint of nervousness in it. "I mean, you throw around love quotes like you're starring in some rom-com, and I swear, half the time it’s like you're waiting for a camera to zoom in on you!"

Knox can’t help the little laugh that escapes him, even as his chest tightens. “I sound like a nightmare.”

“You sound like a romantic,” Chris counters, warmly. “And maybe all that is too much for me, but there are people who’d jump at the chance to be chased by you.”

Knox shakes his head, even though Chris can’t see him. “Yeah right.”

“Knox, I know what I’m talking about.”

Knox’s eyebrows pull together, the fingers of his free hand briefly running over the burn mark on his duvet. “Well, if you happen to know any such people, please do give them my number.”

“I think they have it already,” Chris replies, her voice carrying a teasing lilt that makes his heart race with curiosity.

“What?” Knox blinks.

“Knox, I love you – as a friend, I really do but you can be so oblivious,” she says, a soft chuckle in her voice.

Knox frowns, shifting slightly under the covers as he grips the phone tighter. “Chris, what are you talking about?”

“I just think you should pay more attention to what’s happening around you,” she teases, and Knox can hear the smile playing on her lips through the phone. His heart picks up speed.

Knox feels his pulse race, his mind flickering back to Charlie. “What are you trying to say?”

Chris chuckles again, the sound light and knowing. “I think you already know. I’ll let you sleep on it.”

Knox nods, even though Chris can't see him. He slumps further into the bed, his fingers absently running over the burn mark on the duvet. "Okay," he mutters, feeling more than a little lost. A yawn creeps up on him, and he stifles it, pressing his palm over his mouth.

"Knox?"

"Mhm?" he responds groggily, his eyelids growing heavier by the second.

"You feeling sleepy?" Chris asks, her tone soft and teasing.

Knox blinks, the weight of exhaustion creeping up on him. "Okay, have you put cameras in my bedroom?" he asks with a lazy smile, sneaking a glance around his dimly lit room. His gaze flicks to the shadowy corners, and the warmth in his chest grows when he hears Chris laugh on the other end.

"Maybe."

Knox chuckles softly, his voice dropping. "Chris?"

"Yeah, Knox?"

"I really like being your friend," he repeats her words from the other night, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He imagines the way her eyes might crinkle as she breathes in through the phone, almost able to picture her expression.

"Thank you, Knox. That's very kind of you," Chris replies, her voice soft, throwing his words back to him.

Knox chuckles lightly, but it's bittersweet. His fingers continue to toy with the burn mark left by Charlie. "I'm sorry if I've ever made you feel uncomfortable," he says, his voice soft but weighed down by guilt. The tension from earlier stirs back up, though it's quieter now.

"You've always been a perfect gentleman, Knox Overstreet. You've got nothing to apologize for."

"Okay," Knox whispers, his throat suddenly feeling tight, like there's something caught there. He swallows hard, blinking back the weight behind his eyes.

Chris's voice lowers. "I should probably let you get some rest."

"Okay," Knox agrees, shifting in bed as he adjusts the pillow beneath

his head. He rolls onto his side, hugging the duvet closer.

“But I’m not hanging up first, though,” Chris says, a playful note in her voice.

“Fine,” Knox rolls his eyes, his smile fading into a tired grin. “Fine, I’ll do it. Goodnight, Chris,” he says softly, his voice trailing off.

“Goodnight, Knox.”

He presses the end call button, letting the phone slip from his fingers and onto the bed beside him. As the silence fills the room, Knox stares blankly at the ceiling. He pulls the covers tighter around himself, and closes his eyes, letting the quiet wrap around him, as he surrenders to the fog in his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Yiddish translation :

nareshi : little idiot
nudnik : pest
ziskayt : sweetness
Ikh bin krank : I'm sick

Latin translation :

Totus pulcher es : You are absolutely beautiful

And then I go and spoil it all by saying somethin' stupid (like, I love you, or something)

Chapter Notes

I think you've all been waiting for this chapter, I know I was! So, without further ado, chapter 9!

A little side note; I have messed up the time line a bit, because I think the championship game is before finals week, but just.. let's keep that between us, huh? Okay, on to the chapter!

Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen Knox gets his heart broken enough times to have lost count. It's so easy for such a fragile object to shutter, especially when you give it away as easily and freely as Knox did.

Still, if you ask him, Knox himself will tell you that the third time he got his heart broken was at sixteen.

Knox, along with Luna and Stella, has been living with his father, ever since the divorce, mostly because the three older children refused to leave the brownstone in downtown Brooklyn where they'd grown up. The property belonged to their dad, and so Lyla along with their mom were the ones who had to move out. Waking up without Lyla blasting Taylor Swift in her bedroom or finding his mom already on her laptop before her first cup of coffee felt like missing pieces in the puzzle of his life.

It was a process, but by sixteen, Knox could at least say that the worst had passed.

Until that day.

"But I don't want to change schools!" Knox's voice breaks the tense quiet of the house, as he drops his training gear by the couch, the thud of it echoing against the hardwood floors.

His dad is sitting on the edge of an armchair across from him, fingers idly running over the leather armrests. He draws a deep breath, his eyes looking tired as they fix on Knox. "Knox, please, can we do this without yelling?" His voice is measured, a practiced calm.

Knox paces, his sneakers squeaking slightly against the floor as he crosses the room. "No, we can't!" He stops, turning to sharply face his dad, heart

pounding inside his chest. “Dad, I don’t want to move!”

See, a couple of months ago, during the summer, some of his mom’s friends from her fancy corporate law office had mentioned an old, prestigious boarding school. It had a reputation of being strict and very by-the-book, but after undergoing major staff changes, it quickly became the new talk of the town. Mom, always keen to make decisions that Knox felt were more about control than care, jumped at the opportunity of applying Knox’s name to the school.

It’s now September, and Knox has officially been accepted to Welton Academy of Excellence for Boys.

His dad sighs, leaning back, rubbing a hand over his forehead as if to smooth out the tension building behind his skull. He opens his mouth to respond, but Knox cuts him off again, voice shaking. “This isn’t fair.”

“Your mother is doing this for you,” his dad says gently, and Knox lets a loud scoff. “Knox,” his name is spoken like a warning; dad is still firm about them not speaking ill of their mother. “She thinks this is the best for you, for your future.”

“Shipping me off to Vermont is the best for me? Really?” Knox demands, his fists balling by his sides.

“She wants to give you the best possible education,” his dad says, absently running a hand through his hair. He pauses, searching for the right words. “You still want to be a lawyer, right? From what I’ve heard Welton students are a shoe in for getting into Ivies.”

Knox shakes his head, frustration bubbling up inside him. “I want to be a lawyer like ***you****, not her! I want to fight for the environment and people’s rights not – not on behalf of some corporation destroying both!”*

His dad opens his mouth, but no words come. The silence between them feels thick, suffocating.

“Knox,” his dad finally whispers, voice soft yet weighed down by a situation neither of them can change. “I know this isn’t what you want, but she’s trying to help.”

Knox shakes his head, running a frustrated hand through his hair as he starts pacing again. “Help?” he huffs, rolls his eyes. “This isn’t help, Dad. This is her way of controlling everything – like she always does!” His voice cracks with the last word, his throat tight with emotion.

“She’s not trying to control you, Knox,” dad says firmly. “She’s trying to set you up for success. Besides, your sisters are changing schools too.”

“Yes, but it’s only for a year, and they’ll have each other!” Knox explodes, throwing his arms out in frustration, his movements wild and agitated. “I don’t want to go to some stupid, preppy boarding school in the middle of nowhere! I like it here. My friends are here. You’re here.”

His father flinches slightly at that, his eyes dropping for a moment as if he’s choosing his words carefully. “Knox, you know that if it were up to me, I’d want you to stay, too.”

“Then don’t let her make me move!” Knox pleads, his voice raw with desperation.

“I can’t do that, buddy.” The rueful smile on his face feels like a stab straight into Knox’s stomach. “But hey, you won’t be alone. Your mom said one of your friends from Hebrew School is already there. He enrolled last year.”

Knox pauses mid-stride, his frustration giving way to surprise. “Wait—who?” He frowns, struggling to think of anyone who could be at that kind of school.

“Tall kid. His dad doesn’t know when to shu – stop talking.” His dad grimaces, searching for the name. “Ugh, you went to Latin Camp with him in the summer.”

“Pitts?” Knox blurts, disbelief flickering in his voice.

“That’s the one.”

Knox blinks.

Gerard Pitts. One of Knox’s oldest friends. They’d met each other at Hebrew School, at the tender age of five. Knox still remembers Pitts showing up one evening wearing a giant, plastic T-rex head. He’d clutched his Talmud so tightly that his knuckles turned white. No one wanted to sit next to him—except Knox.

“I like dinosaurs too,” Knox had whispered, glancing over at the T-rex helmet looming beside him. Gerard’s eyes lit up behind the mask. “But I prefer Triceratops.”

Soon after that the two had become inseparable, feeding off each other’s peculiar interests - Knox’s love for Latin, Gerard’s fascination with

astronomy, their shared obsession with ant farming and building home terrariums.

Even though they'd never attended the same school, Knox and Pitts saw each other at Hebrew School and through their extracurriculars. But as they grew older, they drifted apart. Knox had become captain of the lacrosse team, while Pitts threw himself into every academic competition known to man. They'd lost touch during middle school, but last summer, when they had run into each other at Latin Camp, they'd easily rekindled their friendship.

Knox rubs the back of his neck, absorbing the thought. "I had no idea Pitts was at Welton." He draws a deep breath, his frame shaking along with it. "I still don't want to go." But the fight has drained out of him, and he sinks down onto the couch, burying his face in his hands. His fingers curl into his hair as he hunches forward, the weight of it all pressing down on him.

His dad stands up, slowly crossing the room in a few steps. He sits down besides Knox, careful not to touch him, knowing how averse to it his son can be. "I know, buddy."

Three weeks later, and after a five-hour drive Knox walks next to Pitts as the latter is showing him around the campus. The school building looms overhead, all stone and ivy, with sprawling green grounds dotted by towering trees. It's impressive sure, but apart from Pitts everyone who's been introduced to Knox has been an obnoxious asshole with a holier than though attitude.

Knox is this close at throwing hands with the next pompous asshole who starts bragging about the number of estates their family owns.

As they walk, Pitts suddenly leans in, murmuring under his breath, "Oh oh, incoming in about five seconds."

Knox who's been too preoccupied watching the treetops dance at the light breeze, looks around alarmed. "What?"

Before Pitts can explain, two boys approach them. The taller of the pair, lean with a mop of brown, fluffy hair tousled by the breeze, leads the way. The second boy is stockier, equally brown-haired, and his striking cerulean eyes immediately latch onto Knox as soon as they stop in front of him.

"Good day, gentlemen!" The taller one announces with an elaborate flourish of his hands.

"Fine weather we're having, wouldn't you say?" The shorter boy chimes in,

his eyes briefly flickering between the three of them, before settling on Knox again. Pitts huffs under his breath, but he doesn't look annoyed.

"Oh definitely, definitely my good man!" The tall one agrees with enthusiasm.

"Guys – " Pitts tries to intervene, but he gets spoken over.

The tall one dramatically turns his face towards the sky, shielding his eyes from the sun. "The sun is just warm enough to not require an overcoat, despite the crisp air."

"A perfect late September day," the shorter one agrees, nodding.

"Guys-" Pitts tries to interject again, and this time the duo pauses long enough to offer them identical manic smiles.

"Pitts, good friend!" The tall boy claps Pitts on the shoulder with exaggerated enthusiasm, his body tilting slightly as he does so.

"Gerard, old sport! It's been ages!" The shorter boy leans in, pretending to inspect Pitts closely, as if the passing of time has somehow changed him.

"Has it been a fortnight, Charles?" The taller boy asks, dramatically placing a hand over his heart.

"No, no, Neil, surely not that long!" Charles retorts, mimicking his friend's theatrics.

"We had breakfast together three hours ago," Pitts deadpans, with a soft eyeroll.

Neil pauses, blinking in mock surprise. "Ah, right. Of course. How could I forget?" He straightens up, dusting imaginary lint off his jacket. "And who is your friend?" he asks, eyes landing on Knox with genuine curiosity this time.

"That's Knox Overstreet –" Pitts begins, but Charles cuts him off.

"Why does that name sound familiar?"

"Because, dear Charles, that's Knox," Neil says, meaningfully, with a playful elbow to the shorter boy's - Charles' side.

Knox blinks, still a little thrown by the theatrics. "Wait, you know me?"

"Only through Pitts' stories," Neil says, dropping the theatrics. A warm,

easy grin breaks across his face, one of those infectious smiles that seems to brighten a room. “He has a lot of them, and I feel like we’ve been friends for years.”

Charles' face suddenly lights up, “Oh! Knox Overstreet!” he says, slapping a hand over his forehead. “Your friend who got stood up at prom last year!”

Knox freezes, his stomach flipping as the words hang in the air, but he holds Charlie’s gaze, as if unable to look away. “Charlie!” both Neil and Pitts exclaim simultaneously, before he gets a chance to defend himself.

Charlie looks unfazed, a slow smirk curling on his lips, smug and boyish, his arms crossing as he rocks back on his heels. “What? I think she was stupid standing him up. I mean, look at that face,” he adds, his gaze lingering, like Knox is something to be studied. The look in his eyes is still playful, but there’s a quite intensity hiding in there that sends a flutter through Knox’s chest.

Knox’s cheeks flush a deep shade of red that even the freshest roses would be jealous off. The words hit him like a soft punch, straight to the stomach, his next breath shuttering in his throat. Knox’s eyes flicker over Charlie’s face, searching for something that eludes him. The grin reamains unwavering on the other’s face.

“Uh,” Knox finally stammers, throat tight with embarrassment and voice thick with confusion. “Thanks, I guess?”

Charlie leans a little closer, just enough that Knox catches the faintest scent of tabaco lingering on his school uniform. The teasing has all but faded from his eyes, getting replaced by something much more deliberate. “Well, you’re quite welcome,” he breathes the words almost straight into Knox's face, with a razor-sharp edge that makes the hair on Knox’s nape stand in attention.

It's as if time slows around them, the world warping up, narrowing down to the space between them.

Knox’s heart beats in his throat, and he swallows thickly –

And then Pitts let’s an exaggerated long groan, and Knox flinches back to reality. “Seriously, Charlie?”

Charlie grins wider, pulling back with an almost casual air. “What? Just being honest.”

Attempting to defuse the situation Neil chuckles, throwing an arm around Charlie's shoulders, pulling him close as if trying to reign him in. "Don't mind him too much, Knox," he says, leaning towards Knox conspiratorially. There's a twinkle of mischief in his eyes, but his tone is so kind, so understanding that Knox feels oddly reassured. "Charlie can be a pain sometimes, but deep down he is a sweetheart. Don't let him fool you."

"How dare you, Perry?" Charlie exclaims, feigning indignation as he juts his chin out. "I'm no sweetheart! I'm a depraved demon, who clawed his way out of hell – at least that's what my family tells me."

Pitts shakes his head with an exaggerated sigh, looking up at the sky as though asking for patience. "Could you like, not scare off the only person that I like in this school?" Pitts begs, his voice laced with exasperation but also a note of genuine concern for Knox.

Charlie gasps, dramatically, placing a hand over his heart. "Pittsie! You don't like us?"

"I'm starting not to," Pitts grumbles, though he can't hide the flicker of amusement in his eyes.

Neil laughs, soft, melodic and warm enough to melt ice. "Fine, fine, we know when our presence is not appreciated," he teases, his arm still draped over Charlie, as he begins to draw him away. He glances back at Knox with another one of those dazzling smiles, "We'll leave you two to your tour. C'mon, Charlie."

Charlie's eyes unapologetically sweep up and down Knox's body, a new smirk playing on his lips. "See you later, Knoxious," he drawls, throwing in a wink for good measure before Neil steers him in the other direction.

Knox stands frozen, watching them go, feeling flustered and off-balance. His heart slams against his ribcage, shuttering slightly around the edges like it's trying to hold itself together but fraying just a little.

Fleetingly he gets the sense that he's been perceived for the first time in his life.

"You okay, man?" Pitts asks, hooking an eyebrow as he looks at Knox, amusement clear in his expression. "Don't worry. Everyone gets a little flustered around Neil Perry. It's a thing."

Right.

Neil Perry.

Charming, smiley Neil Perry.

Definitely not –

Knox blinks, stopping his train of thought. "Right," his voice comes out weaker than he intended.

"It's sort of rite of passage," Pitts adds, as he starts walking again. "Trust me, you're not the first. That charms of his? Absolutely weaponizing."

Knox makes a noncommittal noise of agreement, falling in step with Pitts, and wondering if maybe sometimes a little heart break can be a good thing.

The days following the doctor's visit are hazy. Knox is perfectly aware of the poets rushing in and out of his room, hovering over his bed and adjusting his blankets, pushing water and smoothies into his hands, making sure he's fed to the point of feeling like a stuffed animal. But the fever leaves him weak, too out of it to do more than comply, groaning occasionally when they fuss too much.

It's exhausting, but the painkillers make it all feel distant, like he's floating somewhere just outside his own body.

"Knox, you have an appointment with your thesis advisor on Friday," Cameron's voice cuts through the haze in his mind, sounding almost shrill. He's sitting on the edge of his bed, pressing a smoothie into Knox's limp hand. "That's like, two days away! You need to be able to at least get out of bed by then!"

Knox groans in response, barely managing to lift the smoothie before it sloshes onto his blanket. He falls back against his pillows, head spinning.

"Drink it," Cameron insists, eyes wide and panicked, like they get when he's stressed. Cameron scooches closer to him, tapping the rim of the glass. "You cannot afford to mess this up, Knox."

Knox just groans again, not really caring about anything other than the fact that the room feels both too hot and too cold at the same time. Cameron shoots him a stern look, and with a pitiful sound, Knox does as he is told. Time slips away from him again, somewhere between drinking the smoothie and tuning out Cameron's endless droning about thesis deadlines.

Four hours later, he hears the sound of the door creaking open letting in a waft of warm air and the scent of something savory. Knox's stomach growls weakly in response, but he grimaces. His nose wrinkles; the scent is too much, stirring bile in his throat as hunger and nausea war within him.

Knox pushes himself up into a sitting position just as Meeks comes strutting into the room, holding a bowl of soup that somehow smells like heaven and hell simultaneously.

"The final game of the season is Friday," Meeks says, voice casual, but there's an undercurrent of seriousness in his tone. "It's Charlie's first championship game. If you don't want to be a terrible boyfriend, you need to drink up."

Charlie.

Charlie who's been visiting him every day but refuses to look him in the eye.

Charlie who barely speaks more than two words to him.

Charlie who's been distant for weeks, who's been keeping him at arms' length for no apparent reason.

Charlie who's still keeping up the charade of their pretend relationship despite it all.

Charlie with his stupid smirk, and his stupid tobacco cologne, and his stupidly intense eyes that make Knox feel –

"C'mon man," Meeks urges, sitting on the edge of the bed, much like Cameron had done earlier. "It's a big deal for him. You know how much he cares about this."

Knox feels like screaming.

He wants to tell Meeks that Charlie won't care whether he misses his game or not. That they're not dating, that he doubts they're even friends at this point. Instead, he reaches for the soup, mutely, the ceramic burning his palms.

The soup tastes bland, almost metallic, but he forces himself to swallow, the liquid spreading warmth through his body. It settles in his stomach like lead, churning uneasily with the bitter remnants of whatever he's already consumed today.

Meeks watches him with a soft smile. “That’s it. Just take it slow.”

Knox wants to snap at him, to tell him to stop being so nice. He is sick, he is not fragile. He’s never felt so breakable before and his friends’ fussing doesn’t help. Meeks lifts a hand as if to rest it on his shoulder, and Knox’s eyes zero on it, his muscles tensing automatically. Meeks notices, and his fingers flex, before dropping once more by his side.

“You ugh – you should be up and running in a couple of days,” he says, shifting a little in his seat trying to fill the awkward silence. Knox catches the discomfort flickering across Meeks’ face, a perverse satisfaction bubbling in the pit of his stomach, mixed with a pang of guilt for making Meeks feel like that.

“Is that your professional opinion, doc?” he asks, the corner of his lips twitching into a half-smile.

Meeks lets a small chuckle, pushing his glasses higher up his nose. “Absolutely. You, Knox Overstreet we’ll be on your feet before Thursday!”

Knox doesn’t get out of his bed until Friday morning.

Todd and Pitts burst into his room like a whirlwind, pulling at his curtains and shoving a selection of clothes in his face before Knox is even fully awake. Knox startles, disoriented, his mind still foggy, but the fever’s gone, and he feels more like himself than he has in days.

“Up, up, up,” Pitts keeps repeating the same word, practically dragging him out of bed, one hand on his back, the other unceremoniously yanking at his shirt. Knox's half-dressed before he even realizes what’s happening. “C’mon, c’mon *shkots!* We’ve got exactly t-minus twenty minutes before you’re officially late!”

Knox stumbles into the bathroom, still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, hair sticking at wild angles. “Timing me is not going to make me move any faster!” he yells through the door, pulling a sweater over his head and trying to fix his appearance, eventhough he feels like he’s fighting a losing battle.

“*Shkots!* That’s exactly what someone who’s running late would say!” Pitts hollers back, pacing outside the bathroom door.

Knox gets dressed impressively fast by his standards. The moment he opens the door, Pitts grabs him by the arm and starts dragging him

through he house, all but running in his eagerness to get to the front door. Todd, trails behind, calmly handing Knox his notes as they pile into the car.

“Why are *you* driving my car?” Knox asks, fumbling with the seatbelt and eyeing Pitts, who’s already in the driver’s seat.

“Because you’ve been bedridden for four days, and I don’t trust you behind a wheel,” Pitts shoots back, looking at the rearview mirror as he backs the car out of its parking spot.

Knox slumps back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest, as his notes drop haphazardly into his lap. “Rude, *sheygets*” he mumbles under his breath, but there’s no real bite to his words.

Todd looks at him through the rearview mirror, his brow knitted with concern. “How are you feeling?”

Knox lets out a half-hearted chuckle, his voice still a bit rough. “Like I’ve been run over by a train.”

Todd and Pitts exchange a glance but say nothing.

By the time they pull in front of the faculty building Knox has sufficiently worked himself into a restless state. Anxiety swims in his stomach, sloshing around, sending acidic bile up his throat. Pitts and Todd give him small nods of encouragement before he steps out of the car and heads towards the professor’s office.

The meeting is mercifully brief. Knox sits across from the professor, slightly unsteady but holding it together well enough. The older man scans his essay with a clinical eye, flipping through the pages with occasional nods. Knox, meanwhile, fidgets with the notes he’s brought along, twisting them between his fingers. The professor had suggested they review them together to make sure they fit on the second part of his essay.

“We have a good, solid start,” Mr. McCalister finally says, looking up with a reassuring smile. “Now, let me see what you’ll incorporate into this,” he says, eyeing the crumbled pages in Knox’s hands.

“Uh, yeah – yes, here,” Knox says, hurriedly laying the notes on the desk between them. He tries to smooth out the creases, his fingers shaking slightly. “I ugh, I wanted to expand a little on the gender aspect of propaganda during wartime, specifically during the second world war.”

The older man nods, shifting through the pages. They spend the next twenty minutes going over Knox's notes, Mr.McCalister offering his input, with a few minor tweaks here and there.

"Good work, Mr. Overstreet," he says, standing to signal the end of their meeting. "I look forward to seeing how this all ties together."

"Thank you, yes I—" Knox starts, but his words are abruptly cut off by the loud clatter of his chair slamming into the desk as he stands up too quickly. The sharp noise echoes through the small office, and Knox's entire face flushes with embarrassment.

"Sorry," he mumbles, frantically adjusting the chair back into place. His fingers tremble slightly as he does, the heat of his blush creeping all the way up to his ears. Pofessor McCalister gives him an amused smile, offering a nod of reassurance.

"No harm done," he says kindly, waving it off. Knox hastily picks his things up, his mortification mounting as he hurries out the office.

Todd and Pitts are waiting for him by the car, and the moment they see his flushed face, Todd asks, "How did it go?"

"Oh my god, oh my god, *oh my god,"* Knox blurts out, still reeling from the embarrassing moment.

Todd's eyes widen in alarm. "Couldn't have been that bad."

Knox rubs his face with both hands. "No, the essay part was okay, I guess."

Pitts frowns. "Then what happened?"

"I ugh, I'm a klutz, that's what happened," Knox mutters, kicking at the ground.

"Knox –"

"No, Ger, just drive," Knox cuts him off, sliding into the passenger seat and slumping against the door. "I wanna go home."

When they get back home, Knox is surprised to find that everyone is gathered in the living room, clustered near the entrance to the kitchen, which, for the first time has its door shut tightly. The silence between them is so thick that you could hear a pin drop. Knox walks in with Pitts and Todd, exchanging questioning looks.

“What’s going on?” Todd is the first to ask, breaking the spell, and the three poets jump in unison, startled by their presence.

“Jesus!” Meeks exclaims, clutching his chest.

“When did you get here?” Neil adds, blinking wide-eyed, his back straightening as if caught off guard.

“Who told you it’s cool to sneak up on people?” Cameron mutters, his arms crossed defensively.

Pitts grins, clearly enjoying their reactions. “It’s actually hilarious to sneak up on people, especially when said people is you, Richie.”

Cameron rolls his eyes but says nothing.

“What happened?” Todd presses, pulling at the scarf wrapped around his neck. “Why are you all out here?”

Neil looks uncomfortable, his gaze shifting until it lands on Knox. His eyes pin him down with an intensity that makes Knox’s stomach drop. “Charlie’s brother called,” he begins slowly. “We were having breakfast and his phone rang, and –”

“He kicked us out,” Cameron interrupts, his voice sharp with irritation, but there’s an underlying unease in his posture. “Like it’s his house.”

Meeks groans, frustrated. “For fucks sake, Cam. Pretend you’re human, just this once.”

Knox frowns. “You left him alone?”

Neil winces, guilt flashing across his face. “He kicked all of us out,” he reiterates Cameron’s words, his voice softer. But that only serves to feed Knox’s frustration.

“So?” Knox snaps, his fists clenching at his sides. “*You* should’ve stayed!”

“Knox –” Neil tries to placate him, but Knox shakes his head, the knot in his stomach tightening.

“No, Neil, you know how he gets about Peter. You should’ve-”

“I tried,” Neil cuts in, his voice rising. “I – he didn’t want me there.”

Knox deflates slightly, but still feels the frustration prickling under his skin. He bites his lip, fighting the urge to argue.

“Right, so what are we going to do?” Todd asks looking between them.

“We should probably wait him out,” Pitts suggests, his hands stuffed in his pockets, a resigned sigh escaping him. “He usually bounces back in no time.”

Meeks nods in agreement, his eyes darting toward the kitchen door.

Knox stares at the door, the knot in his stomach twisting around itself. “No, screw this.”

With a determined stride, Knox heads for the kitchen, pushing the door open. Charlie is sitting on the table, the harsh beat of *Like that* blasting from his phone, but he has his back to it staring blankly out of the window. His body is hunched, one leg drawn up on the chair, arms draped loosely around his knee. Knox hesitates slightly by the entrance, his mind racing. He remembers Charlie flinching away from him, Charlie refusing to talk to him, to look at him. He remembers Charlie snapping at him, not five days ago for no apparent reason. He remembers Charlie keeping him at arms’ length. An anxious flutter curses through him, and for a moment he thinks he should back out.

He hates this.

Hates that he feels like he doesn’t know how to approach Charlie.

Knox works his jaw, takes a deep breath. He soundlessly closes the door behind him.

This is Charlie. No matter what, this is still *Charlie*.

His best friend. His Charlie.

Knox draws another long breath, steading himself, and steps further into the kitchen.

“I knew you’d be the only brave soul to venture in here,” Charlie says, when Knox stops next to him. He isn’t looking at him, so Knox is not sure what gave him away. Still, he feels a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Someone had to check on you,” Knox says, voice deceptively casual.

His fingers are already fidgeting, pulling at the cuff of his sweater. “Drowning your thoughts away, one rap song at a time,” he notices, dropping himself on the chair next to Charlie’s. “Good to see some things have not changed.”

“Did you know that Lamar won a Pulitzer Price?” Charlie muses, still looking out of the window. His voice is distant, almost like he’s talking to himself. “Back in 2018. It was actually the first time that a non-classical, non-jazz piece won the award.”

Knox blinks, momentarily taken aback by the random fact, but he shakes his head. “I had no idea,” he admits, watching Charlie’s profile for any flicker of emotion. But Charlie remains expressionless, his face half-bathed in the fading light coming through the window.

Silence spreads between them, and Knox feels it pressing painfully against his chest. Charlie's tension is palpable, and it spreads, filling the room, seeping into Knox’s body and messing with his stomach.

“So, Peter and Landon are getting a divorce,” Charlie’s voice abruptly breaks the silence, an axe cutting through electrical cords. His voice sounds detached, like he’s talking about strangers.

Knox opens his mouth, while still searching for something meaningful to say to him, something that will make at least a dent into the impenetrable walls that Charlie has put around him. Instead all that comes out is a strained, “Oh.”

“Yeah. And he wants to meet up.”

Another pause. Knox processes the words slowly, not knowing what to say. “What did you say to him?”

For the first time in days Knox sees a flicker of the Charlie he knows, as the posture of his friend changes. “I hung up on him,” he deadpans, finally – *finally*, turning his head to glance at Knox. The corner of his mouth quirks up ever so slightly, and it’s been days since the last time they had a semi-normal talk and despite this being not the right time, Knox can’t contain the laughter that startles out of him.

“Of course you did.”

Charlie shifts in his seat, pulling his leg off the chair and sitting up straighter. “I haven’t seen the dude in what? Five years? And he suddenly wants to meet up because his husband abandoned him for a younger guy?”

“Did – did he tell you that last part?”

“No,” Charlie says, letting out a bitter chuckle. “I’m making an educated guess.”

Knox studies him for a moment that spills into another, a weird mixture of relief and frustration battling inside him. Charlie is joking, and it makes his chest feel lighter, but the chasm between them remains, and it claws at Knox’s stomach. “Did you really hang up on him?” he asks, when the silence has stretched for long enough.

“I did, but then he called back.”

“And?” Knox leans in slightly, his full attention on Charlie.

“We talked, briefly.” Charlie says, his voice lowering slightly. He sighs, leaning back in his chair, arms crossing over his chest. “Well, he talked. I listened. But that’s still progress, right?”

Knox nods, tries to catch Charlie’s eye again. “Yes, it is. Hey, I’m proud of you,” he says gently, and the words feel bigger than the two of them hanging, charged, in the air between them.

Charlie doesn’t respond right away. His gaze drifts back out the window. “We agreed to take it slow. We’ll meet up during the Christmas holidays, but I’ll be the one to decide when and where.”

“Good, Charlie, that’s great.” Knox watches him carefully, trying to gauge how he’s really feeling.

“Yeah…” Charlie’s voice trails off, his body language closed-off, distant.

Knox tilts his head, his tone gentle. “How do you feel about it?” He doesn’t know if pushing him to elaborate on his feelings is the right decision, and his heart hammers inside his chest.

Charlie lets out a sharp breath, a humorless laugh escaping his lips. “You know how in ugh – long running shows the creators wanna pull a twist, and so they have a character that they dropped like in season two make a sudden appearance? That’s how I feel.”

Knox chuckles softly, the tension between them easing, if only slightly “Right, yeah… I get that,” he murmurs. He wants to add more, to comfort him, to make Charlie look at him and actually hold his gaze, but his brain to tongue connection frizzles, and all his words die in his

throat.

Knox shifts in his seat, the pressure of the silence getting to him, as he starts tapping his fingers against his knee. He bites on his lower lip, his eyes flickering over Charlie's profile, wondering if there's anything he can say to fix whatever it is that has rotted their relationship. All that his mind can come up with is a weak attempt to lighten the mood. "So, your brother is still – only, gay, right? Because I do have a single sister."

Charlie raises an eyebrow, the change in conversation surprising him pleasantly. "Wait, *one single sister*? Lyla is in a relationship?"

Knox splutters for a second, surprised by the question, but relieved by the playful tone. "What? No!" He hears a soft snort coming from Charlie. "But I would not waste Lyla on Pete! Stella will have to do. Plus, I'm still holding out hope that Lyla won't like guys."

Charlie makes a disgusted noise, rolling his eyes dramatically. "Ugh, guys are just the worse, aren't they?"

Knox's smirk falters a little, morphing into something much shyer. Charlie's guard slips, if only slightly, and Knox feels a little braver. "Well, not all of them," he murmurs, the words sounding more uncertain that he meant them to.

Charlie glances at him, and there's an inconspicuous shift in the mood. "No, not all of them," Charlie concedes, his voice softening for a moment. "But, unfortunately, yes - my brother is still very much gay."

Knox hums in mock seriousness. "Mhmm, too bad."

Charlie leans back, pretending to think it over, his movements slower, like he's loosening up. "I think he and Stella would drive each other insane."

"So, you agree, it would be a win-win situation."

Charlie lets out a small laugh, "Oh, absolutely!" he says, a smile tugging at his lips, and Knox's next breath comes out a little easier. He lets the humor linger between them for a moment, but then his gaze clears, as if grounding himself back to reality. "But seriously… enough about my dysfunctional family. How did the meeting with your thesis advisor go?"

Knox shrugs, trying to keep the mood light. "It went well, if you

exclude a minor incident of the klutz –" Knox pauses to point a finger at himself, " – making an appearance."

Charlie laughs again, and this time it feels like a real one, the kind that warms Knox from the inside out. "Ah, but it wouldn't be a true Knox Overstreet presentation without an appearance from the klutz!"

"That's – true, unfortunately."

"But it went well? Other than that, I mean?" Charlie asks, leaning a little, his eyes fixed on Knox in a way that feels more like *before* – before the not talking, before the distance, before the uncertainty.

Knox's heart stumbles inside his chest.

"Yeah, I think so. He said he liked the idea, that the argument this far is clear and my analysis shows depth. And he liked the notes for the second portion of the essay."

Charlie whistles under his breath, shooting a smile at Knox that has the tips of his ears turning scarlet. "Kudos to you, then. I always knew you'd blow the rest of us out of the water."

Knox feels a sudden rush course through his body, travelling from his belly all the way to his face. It makes his skin tingle. Knox shifts in his seat, trying to keep his voice steady. "Thanks." Knox clears his throat. "So um… are you ready for your big game?"

Charlie tilts his head, giving him an amused look. "My big game?"

Knox opens his mouth, closes it again without a word coming out. "Well ugh, yeah, I mean… it's kind of a big deal, no? Like, the biggest," he fidgets with the cuffs of his sweater. "You just, um… you gotta – y'know – do your best and um.. kick- kick the ball real hard. Toward the goal."

Charlie stares at him, one eyebrow arching higher. "Kick the ball… hard?" he asks, and Knox feels his cheeks heating up. "Weren't you a jock back in high school?"

"Well, I wasn't the one giving the peptalks," Knox grumbles.

Charlie scoffs. "Well, obviously. That was like the single worst peptalk I've ever heard."

Knox throws his hands up in defeat. "Excuse me for trying to be

motivational!"

Charlie jumps off the table, running a hand down his shirt as if to smooth some invisible wrinkle. "You're excused," he says, a smirk curling the side of his lips. "C'mon, superstar, I need to start getting ready."

Knox manages a small smile. Charlie is still acting weird, and the uncertainty lingers, making him feel a little off-balance. But for now, he'll take what he can get – because it's Charlie, and that's always been enough.

The air is chilly when they get to the stadium, and it's an instant reminder that Knox has spent the last several days under layers of covers. He pulls the letterman jacket tighter around his body, cursing internally for being too stupid to bring along an overcoat. The already gathered crowd is loud, and cheerful, spirits running high for the last soccer game of the season, and the party that will follow it. It feels electric, a buzz of anticipation that reverberates through the throngs of fans clamoring to find their seats.

Meeks yells something about grabbing a hotdog, his voice barely loud enough to slice through the cacophony. Pitts enthusiastically joins him, the two of them soon getting lost into the sea of people. Todd grabs Knox by the arm, guiding him towards the bleachers with a determined look.

"Here," Neil says, when they sit down, draping a woolen quilt around Knox's shoulders. Knox lets a grateful sigh as the warmth envelops him, but the considerate gesture has his stomach swimming with guilt. Knox looks into Neil's deep brown eyes, his words from earlier resounding in his mind.

"Thanks," he murmurs, fingers flexing around the fabric. Neil offers him his trademark smile, and from the corner of his eye Knox sees Todd melt a little in his seat. "Neil, I need to apologize-"

Neil shakes his head, cutting him off. "No, you really don't."

"I was an asshole –" Knox tries again.

"You were worried for Charlie," Neil corrects him.

Knox's brow furrows as he leans in, frustration creeping into his words. "We were all worried for Charlie."

Neil shakes his head, a look of something that Knox cannot read crosses his face. “Yeah, but it was different for you. I should’ve tried harder to stay with him,” Neil pauses, eyes searching as they look at Knox’s face. “But I didn’t, because I knew he didn’t need me there.”

Knox doesn’t know why, but he feels the need to instantly refuse that statement. “Charlie always needs you,” he says, voice firm.

Neil sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I know I’m important to him. We’ve always been codependently close. But today, when Peter called, Charlie didn’t need me. He needed you.”

Neil’s words hit him like a freight train, punching a breath out of him that freezes in the air in front of Knox’s face. He opens his mouth to respond, to say something, but the words get tangled together, stumbling and dying on the roof of his mouth. Neil gives him one more long look, before he turns his attention back to Todd, checking to make sure he’s warm enough.

A weird buzzing sound fills Knox’s ears, drowning out the excited conversations around him. The sincerity in Neil’s words sets something loose in his chest, a rush of warmth that contrasts sharply with the cold air, making him feel too hot inside his own skin. He readjusts the quilt around his shoulders, shifting a little in his seat.

Meeks and Pitts return just as the cheerleaders start their routine. Everyone around them bursts into Yale’s fight song, and the poets get swept in the school spirit, jumping in their seats and belting out the lyrics with the others, a surge of adrenaline coursing through them.

When it starts, the match is quick, brutal and has everyone screaming for their team. Neil and Knox spend the entire ninety minutes of the game on their feet, hands cupped around their mouths cheering loudly for their players and booing the Penn State team with fervor. Knox’s eyes are glued to Charlie’s form, effortlessly weaving through defenders, instantly recognizable in the sea of players. His chest swells with pride, and he’s acutely aware of the jacket he’s wearing, branded with Charlie’s jersey number on the back.

“He is good,” Cameron observes, around the forty-minute mark and Knox’s head snaps towards him, catching Neil’s sharp nod of agreement.

The atmosphere around them changes as Yale begins dominating the game, the cheering growing deafeningly louder, crashing over them. When the final whistle blows, signaling their school’s victory, the

stadium erupts into an explosion of glee. Knox feels a wild rush of emotion surge through him, exhilaration mixed with relief flooding his senses.

“I need to find Charlie!” Knox shouts over the poets’ celebratory chants, already trying to push his way through the crowd. It’s proving to be a difficult task from the get go, but Knox is determined.

“Wait, Knox!” Neil calls after him, but Knox is too far away to stop now, sheer persistence carrying him through. He catches sight of Charlie, surrounded by his teammates, laughter and cheers ringing out as they celebrate their hard-fought victory. Knox’s heart skips at the sight of him beaming, all flushed cheeks and mushed hair. He has no idea what he’ll say once he gets there, but he feels an almost magnetic pull, and so he steels himself in anticipation of joining in his victory.

Knox is almost there when he gets interrupted by a group of overeager girls, rushing past him. Knox is pushed back, and he grabs onto someone in order to not go crashing down. He briefly catches Charlie’s eye, and he opens his mouth to call out, but the noise of the crowd swells, drowning out his voice. Knox watches helplessly as Charlie gets swept away huddled with his teammates.

“C’mon,” Pitts says directly into his ear, his fingers grabbing Knox by the elbow, steading him, before he starts steering him towards the exit. “You’ll catch him at the party,” he reassures, sensing Knox’s reluctance to follow him.

Knox hesitates, his eyes finally swinging from Charlie – who’s already lost in the crowd, to Pitts’ amused face. His friend starts pulling at his arm again, and this time Knox follows, joining the rest of the poets who’re still riding out the high of the win. It doesn’t take long for him to be swayed by their enthusiasm, their camaraderie filling the void left by his inability to reach Charlie just yet.

Knox isn’t sulking.

Definitely not.

But he had hoped—*expected*, even—to have at least a moment alone with Charlie once they got to the party. He doesn't know exactly how that would've gone, but maybe they could have cleared the akward air hanging between them. But Neil was driving, and of course, they ended up arriving super late. By then, the party was already in full swing, and Charlie was otherwise preoccupied.

And Knox? He's managed little more than watching Charlie, from across the room, entertain a very giggly, very *touchy* Ginny Danburry.

No, not watching him *longingly*, just—observing. *Plainly*.

Knox takes a drink from the glass in his hand, hoping against hope that by some miracle, it'll taste like vodka when it hits his tongue. Water. *Fantastic*. His shoulders hunch slightly as he leans against the wall, eyes scanning the sea of people, but inevitably, his gaze finds its way back to the dance floor. Back to Charlie.

Everything feels off. Weird.

"You and Charlie had a fight." Knox startles at Chris' matter-of-fact tone. She has approached him quietly, her steps soft against the hardwood floor. She leans on the wall beside him, her gaze following his, her cherry red lips twisting into a small smile.

Knox's pulse quickens, and he forces a neutral expression on his face. "What makes you say that?"

Chris' head tilts on the side, a perfectly plucked eyebrow arching, "Well, for starters you're standing over here, drinking your sorrows away," Chris gestures toward him, eyebrows now knitting together in concern, "and he's over there, talking to Ginny."

Ugh, Ginny!

Knox swallows, despite feeling his throat suddenly too thick, shifting his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably.

"It's water," he says, shaking himself out of his thoughts. "The others made it perfectly clear that they'll lock me in the house if I go anywhere near alcohol, so…" he laughs, and it sounds hollow to his ears. Wrong.

"Mmm, they're good friends," Chris muses, and then without missing a beat, "So, about your fight with Charlie -"

"We didn't fight," Knox cuts her off, squaring his shoulders as his fingers flex around the cool glass, like it will be enough to ground him.

Chris' gaze is burning as she studies his face, and Knox's defenses crumble like a house made of cards. He messes his free hand through his hair, the past few days catching up with him, chocking him from

inside out “Really?” Chris asks, her voice softer.

Knox’s next breath is sharp, the exhale almost making his chest hurt. “Yeah, he just…” his sentence trails, as he remembers his recent conversations with Charlie. “He’s been distant lately. He keeps brushing me off, says I’m exaggerating when I bring it up,” Knox swallows hard, the words tasting bitter.

Chris watches him carefully, her expression unreadable. “Are you exaggerating?”

“No.” His voice is firmer now, but doubt lingers in his chest. “He has been off… but he won’t tell me why.”

“And you have – no idea?” Chris’ voice is gentle but insistent, like she knows more than she’s letting on.

Knox shifts his weight again, his gaze flickering to the other side of the room, before falling to his shoes. His heart flutters slightly, “No…” he mutters, shaking his head. Chris is still studying his face, and it sends a spike of frustration through him. “Why are you being weird about this?”

“I’m not,” Chris is quick to say, raising her hands placatingly. “Promise. So, when exactly did you have a fig – when did you start noticing he was avoiding you?”

Knox furrows his brow, trying to remember. “I don’t know… around finals’ week?”

“Ah, that would explain it,” Chris says, nodding knowingly.

“Explain what?” Knox’s pulse jumps, his nerves fraying as Chris dances around something he can’t quite grasp.

“Nothing.”

“Chris,” Knox’s voice takes a sharper edge, the anxiety tightening in his chest.

“Knox.”

Knox leans forward ever so slightly, searching her eyes. “C’mon, I thought we are friends.”

“We *are* friends,” Chris says, her voice steady, but there’s a hint of reluctance coloring her words.

Knox presses his lips together, swallowing down the angry words along with the frustration bubbling up his chest. “Okay, friends don’t keep things from each other.”

Chris sighs, uncrossing her arms and stepping closer. “Alright fine.” Her gaze flickers, thoughtful. “You know how we’ve been hanging out more this semester?”

Knox nods confused but following. “Yeah, because you’ve been helping us with the whole ‘fake dating’ thing.”

“Right,” Chris says, her tone careful, “but you barely needed any help at all.”

Knox frowns, confusion mixing with the growing tension in his chest. “No, that’s not true –”

“You came up with the playlist idea all on your own,” Chris interrupts gently. “Same goes with the fort.”

Knox feels the blush rising up his neck, and he glances away, feeling oddly vulnerable. “Yes, but the letterman jacket was your idea.”

Chris shakes her head. “No, I only said that it’s possible to order custom made letterman jackets when you wouldn’t stop bringing up just how romantic it would be if Neil could offer Todd his letterman jacket.” She pauses long enough to give him a thorough look over, cherry lips twitching into a small smile. “By the way, it looks cute on you.”

Knox’s flush turns deeper, the kind of red ripe tomatoes take on in late fall “Thanks…” He clears his throat, “Right, okay? So, maybe I didn’t need that much help after all.”

“You needed, exactly zero help,” Chris says, her voice soft but firm.

There’s a pause, her eyes searching his face, and Knox feels a growing unease in the silence. “Okay, I’m still not following.”

Chris shifts her position, leaning closer to him, her tone softening. “Knox, we’ve been perfectly fine the whole semester. Friendly, dare I say, moving into best friend territory and then bam! The Danbury party happens, right after finals, and the next day you make a whole thing about me calling you my friend.”

Knox’s stomach churns at the memory, heart pounding. “Right…”

“And then two days later, you ask me if ‘our relationship status could ever change’,” Chris goes on, her gaze sharp.

Knox’s heart is beating so loud inside his ribcage that he’s sure Chris can hear it. His breath stutters, mind racing, as he says weakly, “Okay, yes, I did do that, but how is that relevant to my fig- to Charlie avoiding me?”

Chris blinks, takes a moment before saying, “You don’t think the two connect?”

Knox stares at her, the confusion and denial swirling inside him, but beneath it all, a sinking feeling begins to settle in his gut. “No?”

“Knox, seriously,” Chis steps even closer, her voice gentle as the first snow, but still firm. “I need you to think.”

“I *am* thinking,” he says, his voice defensive, despite the growing tremor in it. Knox tries to ignore the subtle shake in his hands.

“And you still don’t see a connection?” Chris sighs, full but soft, gaze unwavering. “We’ve been friends the whole semester. You’ve been gushing about your ‘fake relationship’ for days on end–”

“I was not gushing,” Knox mumbles, though his voice wavers, his heart hammering against his ribs.

“You came up with all those ideas about romancing your best friend –”

“I needed to make it believable,” Knox’s voice is tight, his stomach twisting into a knot.

Chris enters his personal space, standing so close to him that their chests are almost touching. “You never needed any input from me, you knew exactly what to do,” she takes a deep breath, her voice dropping. “You gave Charlie your favorite present from your grandma, and then he suddenly pulls away! He pulls away and you circle back to me, and to whatever lingering feelings may still be there, wondering if we could ever be a thing.”

Knox’s breath hitches, panic rising in his chest like a tide. “What – Chris, what are you saying?”

Chris looks at him with such understanding that it nearly makes him flinch. “Knox, please, I know you’re not stupid, so I'm sure you're only

avoiding the truth because you're scared," she says her eyes impossibly gentle. "But it's okay, you'll be fine."

The weight of her words hits him like a tidal wave, pulling him into a sea of emotions Knox is not sure he can survive. For a moment he feels like he can't breathe. His mind scrambles for denial, for any way to push it all away, but the truth crashes over him before he can stop it.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh no.

Knox's breath hitches as realization washes over him, his heart pounding as if trying to break free from his ribcage. "I'm in love with Charlie."

S.O.S (You know, like the ABBA song)

Chapter Notes

I've spent a lot of time staring at my computer screen, wondering how to preface this chapter. Initially I wasn't going to say anything, because I didn't feel like it was my place to say something, but then I kept scrolling through my socials and I've realised we've become really cruel people. So, in regards to the news about Liam Payne's passing, I don't know if any of you reading this story were Directioners growing up - I wasn't one, I prefered The Wanted, but I still found myself in a state of shock while reading the news. It's weird and maybe a bit hypocritical to feel such shock for a stranger's passing, especially considering the state of the word we currently live it, but I cannot lie; I was shocked, I still am. And so I want to take the time while I have your attention to tell you that, it's okay. It's okay to feel shocked. It's okay to feel sad or heartbroken or whatever. You don't need to apologize or excuse the way you feel. No one is entitled to your justification for your grief. People are cruel, and people will call you names for feeling the way you feel because they think themselves superior for having a different way of thinking, different way of feeling. But you don't owe them anything. You owe to yourself to take care of you, to listen to what you feel like and to express that the way you see fit.
Stay safe. Love yourselves and stay hydrated! We got this xx

Noooow, as for this chapter, uum well I'm not very happy with it, but I hope you'll like it more! Let me know in your reviews!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox is thirteen and Gabe is standing across from him, hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans, weight awkwardly shifting from one foot to the other every two minutes.

The wind is slightly blowing around them, Gabe's curls dancing into the breeze, the dim sunlight making the freckles spilling onto his cheeks look like fade-out constellations. His olive colored eyes are downcast, avoiding Knox's.

"I like you, Knox," he mumbles, teeth worrying his bottom lip, "but flowers are too much."

Knox feels his chest swelling, his heart bruising as it beats against his ribcage, chipping off around the edges.

"You understand that, right?" Gabe is looking at him imploringly, eyes finally finding Knox's, who in that moment feels terribly lost.

"Not really," he whispers, his fingers flexing around the stems of the flowers, permanently imprinting them in his palm and soul.

Knox is fourteen, he is still captain of the lacrosse team despite being in his first year at the "big kids" school, and he feels like he is on top of the world. His friends like him, he has been getting solid grades, and he's dating Maureen, the girl he's been crushing on for months. They're actually boyfriend and girlfriend!

It's Valentine's Day, and Knox has a girlfriend and he feels like screaming it from the roofs! But, well, rooftops are way too high in New York, and his parents would probably kill him if he ever found himself on one unsupervised. So, he does the next best thing.

"Knox?" Maureen's face scrunches up as she leans out of her bedroom's window. "What are you doing?"

Knox is standing in her front yard, dressed in a long brown cardigan and holding a Bluetooth speaker over his head. He smiles widely up at her as the music of ***In your eyes*** *starts spilling from the device.*

"I'm asking you out," he hollers laughing nervously, when Maureen arches an eyebrow silently repeating her earlier question.

"Knox…" the way she says his name sounds wrong. It sends a pang through his chest.

"Maureen, it's Valentine's Day and you're my girlfriend and… will you go out with me?" Knox speaks fast, stumbling over his words, like he is afraid he'll run out of them. He is aware of other people approaching their windows, staring at him, and the second pang in his stomach is stronger than the first one.

"Knox, why would you think this was going to work?" Maureen asks, and there's something in her tone that makes his skin itch.

"B-because it's romantic," he replies, his confidence wavering.

Maureen frowns. "Look Knox," she starts and it's like a vice wraps around

his chest. “I enjoy spending time with you, and you’re cute…” she pauses for a second, her eyes flitting across his face, as she twirls a lock of hair around her index. “You’re also the lacrosse captain, and I’m head cheerleader, plus all my friends have boyfriends, but I don’t think this is working out.”

Knox’s shoulders involuntarily slump, the weight of her words bearing down on him. “But… it’s Valentine’s Day,” he says, voice barely above a whisper.

“I know!” Maureen exclaims, flipping her hair back, with a small eyeroll. She shifts a little, and Knox can tell she feels put on the spot. “I was going to wait until, like, next week or something,” she continues, biting on the inside of her cheek “But this? Like, it’s too much.” She glances down at Knox, her brow furrowed. “We are just… you know, we’re not like that kind of a couple, Knox. I’m sorry.”

The words echo in the chilly February air, and as Maureen’s window closes Knox’s heart catches in his bones, fracturing right down to its core.

Knox is fifteen years old, and he’s invited to the prom by some of his older teammates. Knox had spent the past year anxious that they were secretly laughing behind his back and plotting to take over the team’s leadership, but to his relief, the guys are actually nice, and the team is winning, and everyone is happy.

Knox walks into the gym and he feels an immediate sense of disappointment. The decor looks like a half-hearted attempt at something grand. There are steamers hanging from the ceiling, but they are sagging under their own weight, and half of the balloons look all but deflated, scattered around the room like forgotten afterthoughts. Most of the lights are blown out, but even the ones that are working end up flickering haphazardly throwing awkward shadows across the room, giving an almost eerie vibe to the room.

It's a far cry from the dazzling, magical atmosphere he’d imagined.

And yet Knox feels elated!

Because he is fifteen and he somehow got invited to the prom, and he even has a date! Alison, his date, is running a little bit late, and so Knox tries to entertain himself, bouncing between groups of his teammates. But he is missing his friends, and the store-bought snacks are stale, and he soon finds himself getting bored.

Despite having promised to his sisters that he is not going to pressure her, Knox draws his phone out of his pocket, intending to send a casual text to Alison, just to get word of her whereabouts. Knox unlocks his phone, only to find that she has already texted him.

A grin twists in his mouth, and his heart pulses in his throat and Knox taps the screen to read the text. And he immediately feels like someone has pulled the rag from underneath his feet.

Alison; Knox, I'm sorry but I'm not coming to the prom. I started getting dressed, but then I almost had a panic attack and… I'm not coming. Please, forgive me.

Knox's phone drops from his hand, hitting the floor with a dull thud.

"Knox?" Luna is suddenly in front of him, her brow furrowed with worry as she grabs at his shoulders.

Knox flinches back, ripping away from his sister. The world around him feels blurry, but Luna's worried blue eyes slowly come into focus.

Luna retrieves her hand, studying his face. "Are you alright?" she asks, her voice soft, but Knox can see her date, hovering behind her, smirking into his drink.

"I-I'm fine," he stutters. There's a pressure in his chest that makes breathing hard. "I think I'm going to go…"

"What? Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Knox, wh - Where's Alison?" Luna steps in front of him, effectively making him stop in his tracks. Knox drops his gaze, fingers fumbling with the edge of his jacket, pulling at the seams.

"Oh," Luna whispers, realization dawning on her face.

There's bile in his throat, and Knox tries to swallow it down, but he can't.

"I'm going," he repeats, his voice hollow as he heads for the gym's entrance.

"How are you going to get back?" Luna asks, her voice barely reaching him as he brushes past. "Knox? Knox!"

He pushes one foot in front of the other, his heart pounding so loudly it

drowns everything else out. Only when he's outside, reaching for his phone to call an Uber, does he realize – it's still lying on the gym floor, just like his broken heart.

Knox is sixteen, standing outside in the icy Vermont night. His breath puffs out in clouds, light snow dusting his hair. The air is chilly, his nose and ears are red, but he cannot feel the cold for he feels too warm inside his skin. Oliver, his first real boyfriend is pacing in front of him, gesturing wildly as he speaks.

"...And it's not just that! I mean, I know you mean well, but I don't need a personal cheer squad 24/7, you know?" He finally stops, turning to look at Knox.

Knox who's been standing there for the past twenty minutes, getting an earful of every little thing that's wrong with their relationship. Which apparently boils down to one thing: him.

"I ugh..." Knox stammers on his words, rubs the side of his face. "I don't know what you want me to say."

Oliver sighs, hangs his head. "I don't know either," he admits, breath shaky. "This feels like too much work for a relationship, Knox."

Knox swallows, a pit forming in his stomach. The words that he cannot seem to escape hit him straight to the chest and he stumbles a little.

"Right," he murmurs.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are."

Oliver's eyes are red, but Knox can't feel anything.

Knox is seventeen, it's summertime and he is sitting on a roof, the sun beating down on him. There's a light breeze, but it's still too hot, and his glass sweats with condensation, his ice lemonade turning lukewarm.

Wren's face is flushed, hair flying into the light wind. "You turn every little disagreement into a Shakespearean tragedy!" Wren accuses, pushing a couple of dark locks out of her face as she twirls to look at him. "And I'm not an actor, Knox!"

Knox remains mute, his fingers flexing around the glass.

Wren's voice shakes, and his heart twinges like it's breaking apart again. "I just – It's too much. I can't anymore."

Knox is eighteen and -

"I'm sorry, Knox, I am – because, I love you, I do but -" Ian's sentence trails off, a hand going through his hair, gripping at the short strands at his nape. "It's like every little feeling you have is a tidal wave and I -" Ian stops, looks in his eyes as he takes a deep breath. "I'm barely staying afloat in."

Knox's throat tightens, "But I love you."

Ian's voice is soft, resigned. "I know. But it's still too much."

Knox is nineteen years old and he thinks that he's finally found the right person. They share all the same classes, and their humor vibes like crazy, and they love staying at home as much as he does and -

"Knox, we need to talk," Spencer says, patting the empty spot on the couch next to them. Knox feels his stomach drop to his knees, but he still sits down. Spencer draws a deep breath, reaching for Knox's hand, but pausing before touching him. "May I?"

Knox nods his head, moving his fingers so their hands touch.

"Knox," Spencer starts, and Knox's stomach churns, heat rising to his face.

"Please, please don't say it," he cuts them off, voice pleading. Spencer's brow furrows, sadness filling their eyes.

"I hate hurting you like this," they admit, thumb running over the back of Knox's hand. "But you burn so bright, and all I asked for was a sparkler, not a firework show. It's blinding."

"I can tone it down," Knox speaks fast, but Spencer shakes their head. "No, I can! I'll try, let me try!"

"I wouldn't ask that of you, Knox."

"You don't have to ask, I'll do it! I'll do it, please."

"Gosh, stop begging or I'll lose it," Spencer forces a chuckle. Knox searches their face, desperation clawing at his gut.

“You don’t want to break up with me.”

“No, I don’t,” they admit.

“Then don’t.”

“Knox… I’m so sorry. But I can’t.”

Knox’s heart shutters inside his chest. Again.

Sometimes love is not enough, and other times love is just too much.

Knox is twenty years old. And he promises himself he’ll never fall in love again.

Knox gets to deny his feelings for about five seconds, because then Charlie’s eyes are on his and he is beckoning him closer.

“What are you doing?” Chris exclaims her hands coming to Knox’s shoulders. “Stop staring and move.”

“I - I…” Knox stutters, his voice breaking. His eyes flicker from Charlie’s face to Chris’ and he swallows the sudden lump that appears in his throat. “I can’t.”

“Sure, you can,” she says, slightly pushing him toward the right direction. Knox plants his feet, his anxiety swirling inside him.

“What am I going to say?”

“You’ll figure it out!” Chris gives him a shove, spinning him around and directing him right into the lion’s den.

Knox glances back at her, eyes wide, *betrayed*. Chris just flashes him a thumbs up, then vanishes into the crowd, leaving him stranded. Knox swallows hard, trying to gather what little remains of his wits, but it’s not working. His nerves are shot, his legs feel wobbly, but his feet somehow force him to walk toward Charlie. Every step toward him makes his mouth go drier, his pulse louder in his ears.

“Hey, hi,” Knox mumbles, fingers already fidgeting. Charlie’s eyes meet his, the soft light catching the glint in them, and Knox forgets how to breathe.

“Hello, *boyfriend* ,” Charlie drawls, the word *boyfriend* slipping from

his lips, teasingly slow, and Knox's chest tightens. Charlie leans in closer, his breath warm and heavy with the sharp scent of whiskey, brushing against Knox's cheek. For a moment, Knox feels like he's been hit by a wave. The warmth of Charlie's body brushes up against his, and Knox's heart skips a beat.

"Hi," Knox repeats, breathy, his voice barely carrying over the loud music. His thoughts feel like they've been turned into static. He can't think—can't function when Charlie is this close, this *perfect*, leaning into him with that lazy grin on his face.

"Hate to be dragging you away from the missus, but I wanted to check in," Charlie says, waving a dismissive hand toward the crowd.

Knox blinks, his mind muddled. "Oh," he mumbles, because it's all he can muster when Charlie is looking at him like *that*.

"Yeah... So, things are going good with you and Chris, huh?" Charlie's words are casual, but there's an edge underneath, hidden in the slur of his voice.

Knox feels like someone just doused him in cold water. *Chris?* His mind struggles to keep up. Someone bumps into him, but he barely notices, his focus entirely on the way Charlie's lips tighten into a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"What?" he blurts, blinking in confusion.

A slow smile makes its way to Charlie's lips, twisting the corners, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "You and Chris," he repeats, while Knox stares at him blankly. "I'm happy for you, man."

Knox starts shaking his head, feeling like the walls of the room are slowly closing in on them. His heart sinks, *no, no, no...* "Chris and I – no, Charlie, it's not -"

But Charlie's smile tightens, his eyes growing cold. "Yeah, sure you're not." His voice comes out harsh, and he shifts, looking away as if he's lost interest in their conversation.

Knox tries again, "Charlie, this whole thing with Chris it's not -" but Charlie snorts, bitterly, cutting him off.

"It's fine, Knox," he says, even though it's clear that nothing is. "You don't have to explain anything."

Knox watches Charlie work his jaw, his expression turning stern and his heart clenches painfully inside his ribcage.

"*Cur haec in terris facies humana moratur?*" The words slip past his mouth without his consent.

Charlie's gaze snaps to him, something dark and unreadable flickering in his eyes. For a split second, there's something vulnerable there, but then Charlie's jaw clenches. He looks away again, a vein ticking in his jaw. "Don't waste your pretty Latin to me, Knox. Chris is -" Charlie's eyes scan the crowd, failing to locate her, "- over there, somewhere."

Knox groans in frustration, his hand going through his hair, "Listen to me, Charlie, I don't want to be with Chris!" The confession rips out of him, raw, just as the music swells.

"Knox, don't," Charlie's voice is strained, shaking his head, as if Knox's words are too much. "You don't mean this. You can't."

The rejection hits like a slap, but Knox refuses to back down. His hand shoots out, grabbing Charlie's arm, holding onto him like a lifeline. "Charlie, just listen—"

Charlie shrugs him off, stepping back. "Fucking, don't Overstreet!" There's a raw edge in his voice now, a quiet, aching anger that Knox feels deep in his chest. Charlie's flushed, cheeks red, but Knox's eyes are drawn to the way his jersey clings to his skin, the muscles shifting under it. "This conversation is over. Capiche? Fuck off now, I'm gonna have some fun!"

"Charlie," the name falls from his lips, but it gets drowned out by the loud whoop Charlie cries out. Several, equally loud whoops break around the room, and the team descends upon Charlie like a swarm, pulling him into their celebration.

Knox watches helplessly as Charlie walks away, disappearing into the crowd. His stomach churns, but he blames it all on the whiskey, swirling through Charlie's veins.

Tomorrow will be different.

Tomorrow they'll talk.

Knox wakes up in the middle of the night, slipping out of his bed and rushing to the bathroom. He is still half asleep, having on only his

heavy grey sweater and a pair of boxers, his hair mussed sticking up in wild angles.

He shuffles down the hallway, his bare feet absorbing the cold from the floor, and rubs at his arms in a futile attempt to hold onto some warmth.

He pushes the door to the bathroom open, and stops dead in his tracks, the fluorescent light momentarily blinding him. Knox stumbles back, covering his eyes with his palm, and he hears an amused chuckle he'd recognize everywhere.

"Well, hello there," Charlie's voice breaks the dead silence of the house and Knox is instantly aware that he has walked into the bathroom pantless. "Fancy seeing you here."

"What's the point of having an ensuite if you use the common bathroom anyway?" Knox asks, lowering his hand and immediately regretting it.

Because Charlie is standing there, in front of him, shirtless, with only a pair of grey sweats resting precariously low on his hips. His skin is still damp from a recent shower, and there are water rivulets travelling down his chest disappearing below his waistband.

Knox's mouth goes dry. Suddenly, the cold is not a problem anymore.

Charlie's eyes flicker up, catching his through the mirror. "Bulb went out in mine," Charlie explains. Knox tries to concentrate on his face, but there's water still dripping from strands of his hair and Knox's eyes are desperate to follow its destination. "Didn't fancy taking a shower in the dark." Charlie shrugs, his back muscles flexing under the dim light.

Knox's mind misfires, and he cannot stop his eyes from traveling south, his attention captivated by the way the sweats seem to cling to Charlie's body.

"Wh-why are you showering this late, anyway?" Knox asks, trying for casual but completely missing the case of the door when he attempts to lean against it. He loses his balance but manages to stay up straight in the last second, bracing himself against the bathroom's door.

Charlie smirks. "Just got back," he says the amusement evident in his voice.

“Only just?” Knox asks, more conscious as he looks back at Charlie’s face.

“Yeah, we ugh... the team had some celebratory ideas,” Charlie says laconically, and Knox feels the effect of his words straight to his stomach.

“Oh.”

“Yeah..”

The silence that falls between them feels thick, but not the way it did earlier in the morning. There’s something charged there, and Knox’s heart beats erratically at the idea of leaning into it. Charlie doesn’t move away from the sink, but does turn around to fully face him now. His skin is still wet, water glistening in the column of his neck, and if he were to just close the distance, Knox could -

“You sound a lot more sober than earlier,” Knox croaks out, effectively pausing his train of thought.

“Yeah. Ate something, drank water, threw up some,” Charlie says with a smirk, as he leans with his hip against the sink, arms crossing over his chest, and Knox’s brain momentarily blanks.

This will simply not do. He cannot lose all coherent thought every time Charlie moves while in close proximity!

Knox tries to gain control of himself, but it’s so late in the night, and he’s just admitted his feelings to himself - and Chris - less than eight hours ago.

“Ah that would explain it,” Knox jokes, but his voice comes out thin. He clears his throat, “Feeling better then?”

Charlie shifts his weight between his feet, eyes locking into Knox’s. “Much,” he admits. “Look, about my tantrum earlier -”

“Charlie, you don’t need to -”

“I’m sorry,” Charlie cuts him off, voice much quieter now. “I was in a weird headspace, and I took it out on you.”

Knox nods, “Why though? I mean, you guys just won the championship.”

Charlie’s tongue flickers over his bottom lip and Knox looks away

quickly, heat crawling up his neck. “I guess the phone call with Pete messed me up more than I thought.”

The lie is so transparent that it’s almost painful. Knox is trying to decide whether confronting him about it is the smart thing to do, when Charlie breaks the silence again.

“For what it’s worth, I’m really happy for you and Chris,” he says, something hiding in the undercurrent of his voice that Knox can’t really pinpoint. “I told you she liked you.”

Not this again!

“Charlie, there is no Chris and I,” Knox says, speaking really slowly hoping this time he’ll believe him. “Chris doesn’t like me and I -”

Again, he gets cut off. “What are you talking about; Chris totally likes you,” Charlie sounds almost angry, pushing away from the sink and stalking closer to him.

Knox’s throat feels thick and he tries to swallow the small tremor that goes through him, but Charlie is getting closer and it’s an impossible feat. He stops a feet away from him, the smell of his soap – sandalwood and sage, assaulting Knox’s senses, making him sway slightly on the spot. Knox feels lightheaded but he still hears Charlie’s next words.

“She would be stupid not to.”

Charlie’s eyes widen in alarm, like he hadn’t meant to speak the words out loud. Knox’s head spins as Charlie’s words sink in. They’re so close now that Knox can see the individual droplets of water clinking to Charlie’s eyelashes, the way his chest rises and falls with each breath. Charlie's face heats up and he breaks eye contact, completely missing the way Knox's expression softens.

“Ut vidi te, ut perii,” the words slip out in Latin, because Knox is still too apprehensive to translate them. But they’re deliberate now, spoken softly, delicately as if they’re part of a prayer.

Charlie’s breath punches out of him, his eyes finally returning to Knox’s. For a brief, trembling second, neither one of them moves. Knox’s pulse pounds in his ears as he watches Charlie’s expression flicker between confusion and something darker, that he can’t quite name.

Knox searches his face, catching all the emotions that flit through his eyes but lacking the ability to read them. Charlie's lips part, as if he is about to say something, but then he swallows mouth closing without any words coming out.

And then Charlie's gaze hardens – the walls Knox has spent so much time attempting to bring down, sliding back into place. He takes a step back, eyes averting from Knox's intense stare.

"I need to go," he mutters, voice thin. "Get some sleep, Knox."

And for the second time in the same night, Knox watches helplessly as Charlie walks away from him. Knox is left standing there, breathless, heart hammering in his chest.

Knox is too restless to sleep. He keeps tossing and turning in his bed, his mind too loud to allow him to find any peace. The sheets are twisted around his legs, and he simultaneously feels too cold and too hot. Still, he forces himself to lay down, dragging the covers all the way over his head. Knox presses a hand against his chest, as if trying to lessen some of the pressure there, but the anxiety swirls beneath his skin.

By the time he finally gives up, dragging himself out of bed, Charlie is already gone. Knox's room feels stifling, with his unmade bed and his desk cluttered with books and his thesis notes. Knox starts pacing, to alleviate some of his pent-up energy, hand raking through his hair, pulling at the shorter strands.

That's when Pitts walks in on him. His friend takes one look at him, raising his eyebrows questioningly, taking a seat on Knox's messy desk. "Training for your model career, I see?" Pitts jokes, but Knox ignores him, too busy losing his mind as it jumps between the same two questions. *Why Charlie? Why now?*

Pitts raises an eyebrow but doesn't push, settling in with the usual banter. Knox is thankful for the white noise he provides, but he cannot bother to actively participate. His pulse is still hammering in his throat, all of his muscles taut.

A few minutes later, Todd shows up, taking in the scene.

"What's going on?"

"Knox is trying out his strut," Pitts replies, deadpan, pointing at Knox.

“I think he wants to be America’s Next Top Model.”

Todds stands there, blinking for a minute, before his lips curl into a smile “Really?”

Pitts nods. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Well, then,” Todd joins Pitts, leaning against Knox’s desk as well, “What can we do to ensure his title?”

“What can *we* do?” Pitts’ eyebrows raise high enough to meet his hairline. “Overstreet needs no help, what with that face and those legs…”

“Yeah, yeah, I see where you’re coming from,” Todd murmurs his agreement. “That’s so cool, I never had a famous friend.”

“Oi, Knox, we need access to all the lingerie shows your agency has people in.”

“Both male and female,” Todd pipes up.

Pitts snaps his fingers, “Right, yeah of course.”

Knox huffs, intensifying his pacing. His mind is twirling, and their teasing only amplifies the chaos. “You two are not as funny as you think you are,” he mutters, voice high pitched.

“Au contraire mon frère,” Pitts says undeterred. “We’re actually hilarious.”

Todd grins. “Yes, we are.”

“If Anderson agrees, it’s bascially law, or something,” Pitts adds with a wink.

Knox pauses, stares at the floor. He takes a deep breath, hands clenching and unclenching by his sides. He can tell he’s trembling, as he tries to process his feelings – the fear, the want, the absolute mess of emotions. Todd catches it, and his smile falters. He fixes Knox with a studying gaze, but there’s such softens in his eyes that Knox’s throat feels suddenly thick. “Seriously, though, what’s wrong?”

Knox swallows hard, shaking his head. “Nothing’s wrong, why would you assume something’s wrong?”

Pitts purses his lips. “I dunno, maybe cuz you’re about to create a

ditch by pacing like a madman? Haven't managed to get a word out of you since I got here."

Todd frowns, perplexed. "And what? You just – sat here and watched him walk?"

Pitts smirks. "Can you blame me? He's enthralling!"

"Pitts..." Todd sighs, exasperated, rubbing a hand over his forehead. He returns his attention to Knox, gaze imploring. "C'mon, Knox, you can trust us."

Knox lets out a strangled groan, dragging his hands down his face. "It's just...Charlie," he mutters.

Pitts and Todd exchange not such a subtle look.

"What about Charlie?" Todd asks, his voice careful.

Knox gnaws on his lower lip, eyes flickering between his two friends. His heart is beating so fast that Knox wonders if it's just trying to break out of his chest.

"I'm in love with him," he whispers, but the words sound too loud to his ears.

"Okay, but we been knew, no?" Pitts asks, raising a confused eyebrow. "You did announce it to the entire house like, a week ago."

Knox forces a chuckle, his heart exhilarating to a point where he wonders if he should call a doctor. "Right, yeah, I did do that." He rubs the back of his neck, heat rising to his cheeks.

"Knox," Todd speaks slowly, and his voice is laced with a strange kind of understanding. "Have you talked to Charlie about it?"

Knox's stomach clenches. That's the real problem, isn't it? It's not the fact that he's in love with Charlie, it's that -

Pitts sundely jumps off the desk, eyes wide "Wait - hold up – you haven't said it to each other yet?"

"N-no, we haven't," Knox stammers, his voice shaky as his hands fly to his hair in sheer panic. They haven't said anything because *it's fake.*

They're fake.

This is all wrong.

Todd and Pitts think he's panicking over the confession— because he told the world he's in love with Charlie before telling Charlie himself, but it's so much worse than that.

Knox feels like screaming.

"I just, I don't know if Charlie feels -" Knox starts, voice small and breaking between the words.

"Bro," Pitts cut him off with a scoff. "He is *in love with you!* Have you seen the way he looks at you? Are you kidding me with this shit?"

Knox opens his mouth to say something, anything—but the words don't come. He's lightheaded, the air feels thick, too heavy to breathe. Knox blinks and Todd is suddenly there, his hand rubbing over Knox's shoulder. Pitts is not far off behind. "You really should talk to him, Knox," Todd murmurs, next to his ear. "Maybe he's just waiting for you to say something."

Knox groans, his hands going to his hair again as panic overwhelms him. "I wanted to talk to him—that's why I didn't sleep last night! But when I went looking for him, he was gone."

Todd frowns sympathetically. "Yeah, Neil told me he had an early shift at the radio station."

"Doesn't that place close for the holidays?" Pitts questions, sounding almost as exasperated as Knox feels.

"I think this is the last day, actually," Todd explains. "He'll probably be back in a couple of hours. You should talk to him then."

"Bro, why do you look like you're about to faint?" Pitts leans in, eyes wide with disbelief. "You two are literally dating. What's there to be nervous about? *Charlie is so into you.* "

Knox feels like he's spiraling, his breath coming in short bursts. He looks between them, trying to calm his racing thoughts, but they keep crashing in on him, like waves in a storm. He takes a breath, then another, but it's not enough. He swallows hard, his throat tight.

"Okay… I'll talk to him," Knox finally whispers, his voice barely audible, more of a promise to himself than anything else.

Pitts claps him on the back with a grin. “That’s the spirit!"

Todd gives him an encouraging smile. “You’ve got this. Just... be honest with him.”

Knox nods, stomach twisting in worry.

Knox spends the better half of his day nervously waiting in Charlie’s room for him to return. At first, he doesn’t know what to do, standing awkwardly by the door, fingers pressing together. He doesn’t know why he feels so weird, he never has in the past, and it’s more than a little upsetting. Eventually, he eases himself into the room, taking a seat on the desk chair, spinning around in it, and flipping through the books strewn on top of Charlie’s desk.

After what feels like forever, he moves to the bed, and when he does he only perches on the edge of the bed, holding himself tightly as if bracing for something. But then he notices a flash of red peeking out from underneath Charlie’s pillow and his curiosity gets the best out of him. He inches up the bed, his hand creeping underneath the pillow.

His heart skips as he pulls out the familiar sweater – *his* sweater. Charlie’s been sleeping with it. His heart slams against the bones protecting it, and Knox swallows thickly, his fingers running gently over the soft fabric.

Knox’s mind races, trying to catch up, desperate to piece together Charlie’s feelings – wondering if he has any. His chest tightens, and even though he should feel relief, only confusion washes over him.

The door creaks open, and Knox startles, nearly jumping out of his skin. His heart skitters widely, a sparrow beating its wings against a bony cage.

Charlie strides in, his eyes immediately locking onto Knox sitting on the bed. For a moment, everything freezes. The sweater weighs in Knox’s lap, heavier than it actually is, and the air between them crackles with electricity.

Charlie’s eyes flit from Knox’s face to the sweater.

Shit .

Knox’s throat closes up.

“So, you found it, huh?” Charlie says, voice raspy, busying himself with something on his desk.

Charlie’s tone scratches something deep inside him, and Knox feels the heat spread from his neck to his cheeks. Something dark and *wanting* bubbles in the pit of his stomach, and as much as he tries Knox cannot stop staring at the curve of Charlie’s neck or the way his shirt clings just so to his shoulders.

“Why are you- why are you sleeping with it?” He asks, clearing his throat mid-sentence.

Charlie shrugs, still not facing him. “It still smells like you, kind of…” He pauses for a second too long, before adding, “Helps me sleep, I guess."

All at once the oxygen vanishes from inside the room. It’s as if the two of them exist in a vacuum and Knox’s chest aches as he fruitlessly attempts to get some air to his lungs. His pulse throbs in his throat, and Knox feels too hot in his skin.

“Yes, but why?” he hears himself asking.

Charlie stops what he’s doing at his desk, leaning against it with both hands. Knox is transfixed, his gaze lingering on the way Charlie’s shoulders tense and relax, the way the light catches the slight curve of his biceps. “Because we’re friends,” Charlie replies finally, his voice steady but tinged with an emotion Knox can’t quite decipher. "It’s comforting.”

Knox can’t breathe, can’t think. The air feels thick, charged with unspoken words and unshed feelings.

He runs a hand through his hair, feeling the dampness of his palms as he grips the sweater tightly, his fingers trembling against the soft fabric.

“Ugh, Charlie,” he mumbles, “We need to talk.”

Charlie slowly turns around, resting his hip against his desk. The tension in the air thickens as Knox searches Charlie’s eyes, trying to gauge what he’s feeling. Charlie gives a curt nod.“Yeah, I think so too.”

Knox blinks, taken aback. “Oh,” he breathes.

“But you can go first," Charlie's voice is steady, but his fingers are fidgeting pulling at his sleeves, betraying his nervousness.

“No, no, you go,” Knox replies, his heart racing as he shifts on the bed, the mattress creaking under his weight.

Charlie takes a deep breath, his shoulders rising slightly before he exhales slowly, trying to calm the storm brewing between them. He leans back against the desk, the muscles in his arms defined as he crosses them over his chest. “Alright,” he says, locking eyes with Knox, his gaze intense and unwavering. “I think we should break up.”

Chapter End Notes

(Rough and lyrical) Latin translation

Cur haec in terris facies humana moratur : Why does this human beauty remain on earth
Ut vidi te, ut perii : As I see you, I perish

I'd probably still adore you with your hands around my neck (or I did last time I checked).

Chapter Notes

Guyyyyyyys!! We are at the penultimate chapter, can you believe??? Like, when did that happen?? Oh my gosh, I just... I can't! Okay, this chapter is.. intense! There's no actual violence, but not for the lack of trying. And um... we're getting into nsfw territory. It's not very explicit, but just to be on the safe side, if you're not into this kind of thing you can stop reading here : "Don't tell me what I feel!" Knox screams, the frustration boiling over. His throat feels tight, and all the muscles in his body are taut, shoulders tense as the bow of an arrow, fists clenched." and pick up again here : "The thought has just entered his mind, planting roots deep inside Knox's brain, when he Charlie suddenly shoves him away, hard enough that Knox stumbles back a step, breath ragged. "

Alright, I hope you like it! Let me know in the comments!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox is sixteen years old, and he is... perplexed? Annoyed? He doesn't know which adjective is more fitting.

It's been three months since Knox's move to Vermont and overall, things have been mostly okay. Pitts introduced him to his tight-knit friend group, and they quickly adopted him into their circle, which was a huge relief. And sure, the classes are slightly more demanding, but if there's one thing Knox excels at, it's studying. *His new friends are pretty stellar students too – Knox is half-convinced that Meeks might be an actual genius. And yeah, sure, the school's lacrosse team is in rough shape, but Knox was instantly made captain, which came with perks; like being the first one to choose his room of preference for away games.*

But there's one issue that kinda ruins everything else.

Charlie.

Now, Knox has no problem with Charlie. On the contrary, if you were to ask him, Knox would tell you that Charlie is quickly becoming one of his best friends. Charlie is... witty, and charming, and he is the only one of the guys who's actually into sports—so Knox finally has someone to watch

ESPN with. Charlie is the kind of guy who seems effortlessly cool, always ready with a sarcastic quip or a grin that makes everyone around him laugh.

The problem is that in the three months since Knox's arrival at the Welton Academy of Excellence for boys, Charlie has been to at least twelve dates, all with girls that Knox liked first.

In the beginning, Knox didn't really mind. In fact, the first girl, Abigail, they'd met her together while in town for research at the local library. The boys had spent more time bantering and making a ruckus than actually studying. Abigail was sitting close by, and Knox noticed she kept stealing glances their way. He also noticed that her eyes were exceptionally blue, and that her auburn curls looked effortlessly bouncy and... he was hooked. When it was time for them to leave, Knox approached her and asked for her number which she happily gave him. A couple of days later, they went out for coffee. It had been a great time—at least, Knox thought so—until Abigail ghosted him.

Not a week later Knox heard from Neil that Charlie had gone out on a date with a girl he met at the library.

Knox had confronted him, not so much because he was upset about Charlie dating Abigail, but because he'd kept it a secret. Charlie had been quick to apologize, acknowledging his mistake, and that had been that. Knox wasn't sure if there had been a second date, and he quickly decided that he didn't care. He thought it a fluke and went on with his life.

But then it happened again. And again. And again, and again.

"I think he might be into you," Lyla's voice comes through the phone speaker. Knox, who's sprawled across his dorm bed, drops the pen he'd been twirling between his fingers on the open book in front of him.

"Wait, what?" he asks, pushing himself into a sitting position. "Who? Charlie?"

"Yeah," she says, sounding almost bored.

Knox shakes his head, forgetting that his sister cannot actually see him. "No, that doesn't make sense," he mumbles, he's eyes flickering to the window, glancing at the gray Vermont sky.

"Oh, why?" she asks, nonchalantly, "Is he straight?"

Knox hesitates for a moment, "No, I don't - I don't think he is."

“Right, so, he likes you.”

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

“Easy,” she says, but doesn’t provide any further explanation.

“Lyla?” Knox prompts after several beats of silence.

“Oh, sorry,” she says, snapping back into focus. “I thought I said the words out loud; right okay, this Charlie dude, he likes you.”

Knox rolls his eyes. “You’ve said that already, but why?”

“He keeps hooking up with the people you like,” Lyla repeats, like that explains anything.

Knox swallows the urge to snap at her. “So?”

“So, he hooks up with them so you can’t.”

Knox’s pulse quickens as he fiddles with the hem of his shirt. “That - that’s stupid.”

“Boys your age usually are,” she replies, voice teasing.

“Hey!” Knox protests, rubbing his face with his free hand, willing the weird flutter in his heart to go away. “Okay, why wouldn’t he ask me out if he liked me?”

“You said it yourself - he is stupid,” she shoots back, a smirk in her tone.

Knox’s fingers flex around his phone. He presses it closer to his ear. “You really think that makes sense?”

“Uh, yeah,” Lyla says with an exaggerated sigh, like she’s dealing with someone exceptionally slow. “He keeps hooking up with every girl you show interest in, Knox. That’s not a coincidence.”

“You’re reaching,” Knox says, accusingly, picking at an errand thread in his duvet.

“Yeah, I’m reaching for the obvious,” she retorts, sounding way too confident for her age. “He doesn’t want you to date anyone, cuz he wants to date you. Duh.”

Knox huffs, grabbing his pillow and pressing it over his face. “You’re impossible.”

“No, I’m right,” Lyla says, with her trademark smirk Knox can practically hear through the phone. “It’s always the boys who don’t realize the super obvious things. Like, Charlie likes you. Done. Case closed.”

Knox tugs the pillow down to his chest fingers fidgeting with the fabric. “But he doesn’t act like he likes me, Lyla.”

There’s a beat of silence and then; “Knox, do you want him to like you?”

“No.”

“You sound uncertain,” Lyla teases, her voice smug and knowing.

“No, I don’t,” he insists, the words coming out sharper than he intended. Knox’s heart is pounding behind his bones, and he can’t figure out why this is getting to him so much.

“Right.”

“I don’t want Charlie to like me, Lyla,” Knox tries to sound stern, but his voice falters slightly. He tugs at the hem of his shirt, fingers fidgeting. “He is my friend, my best friend, even.”

“Mhm, okay,” comes her amused response.

Knox groans, pressing his palm against his forehead. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?” She asks, her voice an imitation of perfect innocence, but he can almost hear the smirk in her lips.

“That, stop that voice!” Knox snaps, his pulse quickening, warmth rising to his neck. His fingers twist around the hem of his sweater, as if it will help ground him.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about – but, Knox?” Lyla calls, her voice softening, but still playful.

Knox feels a prickling sensation at the back of his neck, the tension winding tighter in his chest. “Yeah?”

“You already seem pretty hung up on your best friend.”

“No, Lyla -” he starts, his voice cracking slightly, but she cuts him off hurriedly.

“Mom’s home, I gotta go! Love you, bye!”

“Wait - Lyla!” Knox blurts, but the call has already disconnected with a soft click.

Knox drops the phone onto his bed, a sense of loss flooding through him. He falls back on his mattress, dragging both hands down his face. His heart is still beating a little too fast in his chest, and his mind all but reels.

Hung up on Charlie?

Pffft.

That… that’s ridiculous!

Charlie is his friend. His good friend. His good friend who sometimes has the ability to render Knox speechless just by looking -

Knox groans, presses the heels of his palms against his eyes, hard enough to see stars.

Charlie doesn’t like him.

Lyla is reaching; Charlie wouldn’t go out with all of those girls if he liked Knox. Knox is not even sure if Charlie likes guys! Sure, he has caught him staring a couple of times, and he knows Charlie was Neil’s first kiss – but, isn’t that what best friends are for?

Knox huffs a frustrated breath, blindly reaching for his pillow and shoving it underneath his head. His pulse is still jumpy in his throat, and Knox counts to ten, breathing slowly in through the nose, out through the mouth.

Lyla’s wrong.

She has to be wrong.

Knox stares at his breakfast like it has personally offended him. The kitchen is quiet, and so is the rest of the house. Sunlight trickles in through the windows, catching on the fairy lights that Meeks and Todd strung across the room in a burst of holiday cheer. Knox glares at them too, his stomach twisting at the thought of the holidays. The last thing he needs right now is his sisters needling him about what’s wrong with him.

He groans and rubs a hand over his face, then picks up his toast and forces a bite down. For the past few days, he’s been locked away in his room, with Todd or Pitts delivering his meals. This is the first time

he's ventured out on his own, and it already feels overwhelming.There's a permanent weight, pressing down against his chest, gaining heft every time he breathes.

Knox is in the middle of swallowing down his second bite, when he hears the sound of steps coming his way. He presses his lips together, but doesn't look up, hoping whoever it is won't bother talking to him.

"What did you do?" Cameron's voice cuts through the silence.

So much for hoping.

Knox blinks, head slowly lifting to look at the redhead. "I'm sorry?"

"Charlie," Cameron says, arms crossing over his chest. "He told us you two broke up."

Knox's stomach flips, the toast he's just chewed threatening to make a comeback as it travels up his throat.

He knew that.

He knew that Charlie was going to tell them.

He'd tried to stop him that day, in Charlie's bedroom. He'd tried to talk him out of it, he'd pleaded with him -

"What about Neil and Todd?" Knox had demanded, blocking the door to stop Charlie from leaving. "We made a deal; we're going to help them -"

"Neil and Todd have been dating long before we started this... whatever it is." Charlie had replied, his eyes fixed somewhere above Knox's head.

"Oh," Knox had breathed. Now, he repeats the word aloud and reaches for his coffee, trying to hide the tremble in his hand.

Cameron moves closer to the table, but he doesn't take a seat, choosing instead to loom over him. "He said he got drunk and kissed someone else – but I don't buy that. Dalton is a lot of things, but he wouldn't pull that. Not on you."

Knox swallows a scoff, his fingers clenching around the mug.

So, that's what he'd gone with? Taking all the blame, being the martyr.

Knox bites on the inside of his cheek, but then Cameron's words finally register, and his brow furrows. "Wait, are you actually defending Charlie?"

Cameron rolls his eyes, shifting his weight. "No."

"Yes, you are," Knox counters, an undercurrent of amusement coloring his words, despite the tense atmosphere. "Cameron, I didn't know you cared."

"Shut up. I don't care," Cameron shoots back, glaring. "But he's been moping around for weeks, way before this supposed break up happened."

Knox's eyes drop to his breakfast. He shrugs a shoulder. "Alright," he says, lips pressing into a thin line.

"Alright?" Cameron echoes, arching an eyebrow.

Knox keeps staring at his half empty plate. "Yeah, I don't know what you want me to say."

"I don't want you to say anything; I know you did something," Cameron's tone is hard and accusing. It forces Knox's head to snap up.

"I didn't do anything, Cam," he says, incredulous.

"Bullshit," he scoffs, squaring his shoulders, like he is preparing for a fight.

Knox feels his patience running thin, his chest tightening with frustration. "Look, Cameron, I know you have this weird 'frenemies' obsession with Charlie, but I didn't do anything, alright? Leave me alone."

"No."

Knox stares at him, baffled. "What do you mean *no* ?"

"I am not leaving. You need to own up, and you need to fix whatever it is you did."

Knox sets his cup down a little too hard, the sound of it clinking against the tabletop loud enough to reverberate through the room. His voice is dangerously low when he says, "I told you, I didn't do anything."

“And I called your bullshit,” Cameron replies, nonplused. “We can play this game all day long.”

The familiar flames of anger lick at Knox’s throat, growing from ambers into blaze in a matter of minutes. “Actually, we can’t because you’re starting to really get on my nerves, *Dick* . So, kindly, fuck off.”

Cameron doesn’t budge, “Charlie has turned into a real pain to live with -”

“And that is not my problem anymore!” Knox snaps, his voice rising, his hands flexing into fists by his sides.

“It is too, because you’re the reason -”

“Oh, fuck you, Richard!” Knox cuts him off, jumping from his chair. The flames have taken over his chest, sizzling his insides, and everything Knox has been repressing the past few days threatens to make a loud explosion. Knox knows he should reign it in, but his breaths are coming too fast, and they’re too shallow, too uneven.

The room is beginning to feel too small.

Stifling.

“What the hell is going on here?” Pitts voice breaks through the angry fog in Knox’s mind, as he steps into the kitchen. Knox watches him as he assesses the situation, Pitt’s brows pulling on his forehead when he makes the decision to stand next to Knox.

“Richard is reprimanding me for getting cheated on,” Knox says, his voice bitter. He glares at Cameron.

“You did not get cheated on!” Cameron snaps back immediately.

Pitts’ head tilts a little on the side, questioningly. “Isn’t that what Charlie said?”

“There’s no way – Gerard, please, do you really think Charlie cheated on Knox?” Cameron turns his gaze to Pitts, exasperated, seeking backup.

Pitts’ eyes flicker between the two of them. “Why would he lie about that?”

“Probably because Knox put his foot on his mouth like he always does.”

Knox sees red.

On moment he is standing next to Pitts.

And then he blinks.

And he's almost on Cameron, fist raised like he is about to pound down on him, the only thing stopping him the arm Pitts has snuck around his chest. Holding him back. "*Royk arop, nudnik!*" Pitts speaks sternly, but low, his breath crushing on Knox's cheek.

Cameron has taken a step back, throwing his hands out to block any attempted attacks. "We're resorting to violence? Really, Overstreet?"

Knox is panting, chest heaving. His heart is pounding like crazy behind his ribcage. His fist still hovers in the air, suspended mid-charge, and his breath comes out in sharp, angry bursts.

"*Nudnik* , chill," Pitts says, his arms flexing around Knox's chest as he tightens his grip on him. Knox's jaw clenches, his eyes shining murderously as he glares at Cameron.

"You either shut up or so help me, Richard, I'll make you shut up!" Knox spits, voice hoarse with anger, his whole body vibrating with unspent adrenaline.

Cameron straightens his body, crossing his arms again. "You've definitely done something wrong if you are willing to resort to physical violence!"

Knox tries to lunge at him again, but Pitts is stronger than he looks, maintaining his hold around Knox's body and pulling him back. "Cameron, stop it!" Pitts snaps, and he somehow maneuvers Knox, pushing him behind his back, as he steps between the two of them.

"Ger, get out of my way," Knox growls, his voice tight every inch of him wound too tight.

"No, I won't," Pitts says, turning to look at him. "You've never been in fight, Knox, what the hell are you thinking?"

"I can take, *Dick* ," Knox reassures, his voice raw with barely contained rage.

"Oh, I'd like to see you try," Cameron eggs him on, stepping closer, despite Pitts trying to hold him back. "Then maybe for once you'll

own up instead of playing the victim!”

“Richard, knock it off, dude,” Pitts says warningly, turning his back to Knox to fully face Cameron.

“Why should I? Knox is the one being a coward, too afraid to admit that he messed up -”

“Shut up,” Knox says, his voice so incredibly calm that it makes Cameron actually press his lips together. “You have no fucking idea what you are talking about, alright, Cameron? You know *nothing* about what’s going on between me and Charlie.”

It takes a moment for Richard to find his voice again. “I know you’re the one who always messes up. Always have been, always will be. You mess up and then you play the ‘poor me’ card and everyone trips over their feet to fuss over you.”

Knox freezes. His mind goes blank, static filling the space where thoughts should be.

Cameron is right; he is the one who messes up.

Always.

And maybe he’s got some of the details wrong, but Knox knows there's truth hiding behind what Cameron’s saying. The weight of it is unbearable.

Knox is the one who messes up.

The whole ‘fake dating’ thing had been his idea.

He’d flirted with Charlie, unintentionally pushing him away, unknowingly falling for him for real.

Every time something went wrong, he ran back to Chris, pretending it was still just a game. He toyed with Charlie, living out his fantasies, but never fully committing. Never owning up to it.

Cameron is right; Knox is the one who always messes up.

“I -” Knox starts, but his voice cracks, betraying him.

Cameron steps even closer now, all but pressing his body against Pitts who’s still standing between them. “Are you finally ready to admit your mistake, Knox?”

Something snaps inside of him and the fire dies out in his stomach. His breaths become even more swallow, and perspiration breaks on his forehead, despite Knox feeling his teeth chattering at the sudden coldness.

The ground shifts underneath him, and the only thing that keeps him up straight is Pitts' hand on his arm, anchoring him to the here and the now.

"Right, Cameron, I need you to back off like a million steps, alright?" Pitts' voice breaks through the haze in Knox's mind and he sees his friend actively pushing Cameron away.

"Why are you still defending him, Gerard? Can't you see that he is obviously at fault?"

"*Shut up!*" Knox roars, through the tremors taking over his body. His voice is shaking, and his chest tightens to the point of pain. Knox feels his lungs constrict, because there's not enough air in the room, and the kitchen's walls are closing in around him. "You don't know anything about this! About what I – about Charlie -"

Knox's words tangle in his tongue, dying at the roof of his mouth.

He is feeling sick.

"Hey, Knoxie?" Pitts calls out, moving closer to him. "Calm down, dearie, okay? Take a deep breath for me."

But Knox *can't.*

He can't breathe.

He can't think.

His world is unraveling at the seams and Knox can do nothing to stop it.

Cameron's next words sound like they're underwater. "You need to fix this, Knox, or else -"

"Alright, that's it!" Pitts firmly places himself in front of Knox, arms folding over his chest. "One more word out of you, and *I'll* be the one laying you down."

"Pitts -" Knox starts, his voice strained, but Pitts doesn't look at him.

“Nah, fuck this! I won’t stand here and let him have a go at you when Charlie is the one who messed up!” Pitts snaps, and Knox swallows thickly, torn between the guilt gnawing at him and the fierce loyalty in Pitt’s voice.

Cameron scoffs, leveling Pitts with an incredulous look. “Look, Gerard, I know Dalton, okay? He wouldn’t just cheat! There’s more to this, and you know it.”

“He did admit to it, didn’t he?”

“Sure, but - ”

“No ‘buts’. Charlie is my friend too, but he is the one who crossed the line. I don’t know why you’re taking this out on Knox, but that’s over now,” Pitts shoots back, stepping forward until he’s practically nose-to-nose with Cameron.

For a moment it feels like Cameron might push again, like things are teetering on the edge of violence. But then the sound of the front door banging closed rings through the air, and soon after Neil and Todd walk into the kitchen. The pair of them freezes just past the entrance, both looking startled by the scene before them.

Knox sees them drop each other’s hand the minute they realise they’re not alone, and his stomach flips violently.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Todd blurts out, eyes wide as they bounce between Knox, Pitts, and Cameron.

Neil’s gaze sweeps over the room, immediately taking in Knox’s disheveled appearance, and Pitts and Cameron standing close enough to butt heads. His eyes return to Knox, a slow understanding dawning on them, as he takes one more step further into the room. “There’s been a slight tension in here, huh?” he attempts to joke, but Todd is not having it.

“You think?” he snaps, moving around the table and coming to a stop right next to Pitts and Knox. “Are you alright?” he whispers, a hand coming to rub sympathetically on Knox’s shoulder.

Knox’s anxiety threatens to overwhelm him once again, but then Cameron scoffs, while glaring at Pitts. “See? He always end up getting codcled,” he mutters darkly, his jaw tight as he finally steps back.

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?” Todd asks again,

clearly upset, and Knox's heart twitches at the way Todd's voice wavers.

Pitt turns to look at him, still keeping his stance between Knox and Cameron. "Cam won't leave Knox alone, that's what's going on. He's been hounding him nonstop about Charlie."

Todd's eyes widen and they immediately fly to Neil.

There's a moment of silent understanding between the two of them, and Neil makes a subtle motion with his head—almost too small to notice—urging Todd to let it go.

Knox feels a sudden weight drop in his stomach, as if the floor has fallen out from under him. Todd knows.

Of course he knows.

"Todd and Neil have been dating long before we started this."

That's what Charlie had said that night, his voice distant, barely cutting through the fog of Knox's panic. Knox had been too overwhelmed to ask how Charlie knew back then.

But now, it clicks into place.

Charlie knew because Neil had told him.

And Neil had told him because Charlie had confessed the truth.

"Alright," Neil finally says, with a small nod of his head. "Let's all calm down. Cameron, back off; what happened between Knox and Charlie is none of our business. Knox," Neil pauses, eyes returning to Knox, soft but serious, "Why don't you come with me?"

Knox opens his mouth to respond, but his voice catches, his emotions still choking him. He looks at Neil, his throat tight, and nods.

"Come on," Neil murmurs, gently guiding him towards the door. "Let's get out of here for a bit, okay?"

Knox is almost out of the kitchen when he hears Pitts' voice, "I don't care what you think happened, Cameron, but you don't get to come at him like that again. I'm serious."

Knox pauses. He swallows thickly, his throat constricting again. Pitts is standing up for him, fiercely, even though Knox isn't sure he

deserves it.

Neil's voice is soft when he speaks again. "Come on, Knox," he says gently, motioning with his head toward the staircase. "Let's go."

This time, Knox follows, feeling the weight of the morning pressing down on his chest. He doesn't look back as Neil leads him out of the kitchen, Todd's worried gaze following them until the bent of the staircase hides them from view.

The silence in Neil's room is welcoming, after the events of the past half-hour or so. The door clicks softly behind Neil's back, who decides to lean against it, as Knox finds himself immediately climbing on the windowsill, grabbing one of the throw pillows in his lap.

Neil doesn't push him, giving him time to gather his thoughts, as he rolls back and forth on the balls of his feet, never moving away from the door. Knox appreciates his thoughtfulness, but the jumbled mess in his head gives him no reprieve and so he speaks before he's ready to.

"You know," he rasps, his voice hoarse. It's a mix of accusation and simple realization, and Neil tilts his head on the side as he regards him.

"I do," he admits, the ghost of a soft smile playing at his lips.

Knox sighs, clenching the pillow between his hands. "Todd knows too. Of course he does – you don't need to answer that." A bitter chuckle bubbles up his throat, but he swallows it before it escapes. "Look, Neil, I'm - I'm really sorry."

Neil looks at him, eyebrows arched. "What are you sorry for?"

One of Knox's hands messes through his hair, fingers tugging at the strands. "Lying to your face, trying to manipulate you, I don't know - take your pick."

The corner of Neil's mouth twitches only slightly. "Well, seeing as Todd and I are already together, nobody manipulated anyone."

"Sure, but the intend was there," Knox mutters, dropping his gaze to the floor. "What we did, what I did – it was wrong."

"Yes, but no harm was done."

Knox's eyebrows pull on his forehead, as he glances at Neil in disbelief. "Why can't you just – why are you not upset about this?" he demands, almost exasperated. "You're acting like it's no big deal!"

"Why am I not upset about you lying to us?" Neil asks, waiting for Knox's nod of approval "Because I don't think you really did."

Knox's frown deepens. "Charlie and I have been pretending to date for - like – months, Neil."

"And how much of it was a lie?" Neil asks, his tone pointed.

Knox blinks in confusion. "What?"

"How much of it was a lie? For you?"

"I -I don't..." Knox stammers, feeling his heart picking up inside his chest. Neil is giving him a sympathetic but knowing look.

Surely, he can't know.

Had he been this obvious – this transparent, when he himself had just realized his feelings a couple of days ago? And then it dawns at him.

"Oh, Todd told you, didn't he?" he asks, voice stiffening.

The conversation he'd had with Pitts and Todd.

Of course.

Neil rolls his eyes, "I have eyes, Knox, I didn't need Todd to tell me anything," he says, voice soft but firm.

"You're not denying that he did, though," Knox points out, hugging the throw pillow tighter in his arms.

Neil shakes his head a little, a fond smile curling on his lips. "Knox you ordered a custom-made letterman jacket with Charlie's jersey number and his name on the back. I mean... I would have to be brain damaged to not see through that."

Knox flushes, his cheeks turning red."That was all part of the fake dating plan."

"Was it?" Neil challenges. "Because Charlie looked pretty damn surprised when he saw it." Neil pauses, again, eyes flickering to Knox with a knowing look. "At this point I think the only person who

doesn't know you're in love with Charlie is Charlie."

Knox swallows thickly, the words hanging heavy in the air between them. "I think he knows..."

"What makes you say that?"

There's a dull ache in his chest, spreading to the rest of his body, as Knox pushes the words out of his mouth. "He's been pushing me away, for weeks now. Every time I try to talk to him, he just shuts down or finds an excuse to leave."

Neil fixes him with a thoughtful look. "Let me get this straight - you think Charlie knows you're in love with him, and that's why he's been pulling away?"

"It clearly makes him feel uncomfortable," Knox mutters.

Neil stares at him for a second, with the kind of intense look he usually reserves for Todd. HIs lips are pressing into a thin line, like he is trying to stop himself from talking, and Knox notices a flash of sadness pass quickly through his eyes.

"Right," Neil says finally, voice careful.

"I just..." Knox sighs, his head falling forward, his chin resting on the pillow. "Oh god, I've messed everything up," he mutters, "This stupid idea was all my own and I should've never mention it to Charlie!"

"It's fine, Knoxie -" Neil starts, but Knox cuts him off, his head snapping up to look at him.

"No, it's not! I thought I was sneaky enough to pull some elaborate scheme to get you and Todd together, like I'm - like I'm smarter than you! I lied to you for months and I don't care how you excuse it, that was just a shitty thing to do!"

Neil remains silent and calm, watching Knox with an unreadable expression on his face. Knox's throat tightens, as he keeps going, the words now tumbling out of his mouth as if a river that has found an opening in a dam.

"I mean, what right did I have to try and interfere? So, some of your interactions with Todd made me feel a little uncomfortable, so what? You two had your own thing going, and it worked perfectly for you! I should be happy! Instead, I thought I knew better and I dragged

Charlie into my mess! And-and-and I ended up pushing him away!"

Knox's chest is heaving, his breath coming out short and punchy. He doubles over himself, feeling the tightness in his chest intensify, as his skin starts tingling all over. Next thing he knows, Neil is standing next to him, crouching so that they're on the same eyelevel.

"Knox, calm down," he says, voice smooth and soft. "May I?" he asks, his hand hovering over his chest. Knox nods, because he doesn't trust himself enough to speak. Neil places a hands on Knox's chest over his heart, before grabbing Knox's hand, pushing it over his own heart. "C'mon, breathe with me," he instructs, drawing a deep breath.

Knox tries to concentrate on the way Neil breaths, but his labored breaths resound in his ears. He shakes his head, tries to pull away, but Neil holds him in place, forcing their eyes together. Neil's heart patters underneath Knox's fingertips, and it surprises him enough to steal his next breath.

"One through the nose, one out the mouth," Neil says softly, and Knox tries to follow.

Knox squeezes his eyes shut, focusing on the steady rhythm beneath his palm – Neil's heart beating in sync with his own. The gentle pressure of Neil's hand over his chest is grounding, and slowly, Knox's breathing starts to match Neil's.

In through the nose. Out through the mouth.

"It's been a tough morning for you, huh?" Neil's attempts to joke, but he keeps his voice calm and measured, afraid to disturb the fragile control Knox has over his breathing.

"You've no idea," Knox rasps, and he feels the respiration gathering on his forehead and his lower back.

Neil squeezes his shoulder gently, pulling back a little to give him some space. "I don't want you to keep feeling guilty," he starts, and Knox opens his mouth, but Neil's gaze turns serious, "No, I'm speaking now. You don't need to keep punishing yourself. You messed up, but it's okay, it's definitely not the end of the world," Neil says quietly, his voice filled with enough kindness that guilt threatens to start choking Knox again.

"I've been lying for months," Knox mumbles, in between shallow breaths

“You weren’t lying though,” Neil reminds him.

Knox lets out a weak, breathy laugh. “No, I guess I wasn’t…” he mutters. “But if I hadn’t dragged Charlie into it – I wouldn’t be losing him.”

Neil doesn’t answer right away, letting the words dangle between them. When he finally speaks, his tone is more gentle, “You’re not losing him, Knox.”

Knox rubs a hand over his eyes, feeling them beginning to sting. “He hates me, Neil,” he says, and it’s barely above a whisper.

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” Neil insists. “This is not what you think it is.”

Knox wipes at his eyes with the back of his hand, focusing on Neil. “What do you mean?”

Neil hesitates for just a second before answering, words calculated. “Charlie’s been pulling away, yeah. But it’s not because of you – not the way you think, anyway.”

A new batch of tears blooms in Knox’s eyes and he feels his heart skipping several beats. An uninvited image of Charlie and Ginny kissing at the Danbury party flashes in his mind – the way they looked, their comfortableness with each other. “If it’s not me, then what is it?” Knox asks, his voice low, almost fearful. “Is it Ginny?”

Neil bites on his lips, a hint of exasperation in his expression. “No, it’s not Ginny.”

Knox shakes his head, still unconvinced. “But they kissed,” he says. “I saw them kiss.”

Neil sighs, leaning back a little. “Yeah, I heard about that. But trust me – Ginny isn’t what’s going on here. Whatever happened between them, it doesn’t matter.”

Knox furrows his brow, his stomach twisting. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because,” Neil replies, his eyes meeting Knox’s with an unflinching certainty. “I know, Charlie, okay? This thing with Ginny, it looked like something that it wasn’t. Just trust me on this, Knoxie.”

Knox drops his gaze again, his mind swirling. “I don’t know what I’m

supposed to do, Neil. He won't even stay in the same room with me long enough to talk to him."

Neil sighs, runs a hand through his hair. "Charlie is not good at talking when it comes to emotions, I know that. But you are, Knox," he says, trying to catch Knox's eyes. "You just need to push him a little. And I have you the perfect setting."

Knox is still very much unsure about everything, but he looks at Neil expectantly. The corner of his friend's mouth twists into a small, mischievous smile. "The Christmas' party tonight, the one Chris and Ginny are co-hosting. Charlie's going to be there."

Knox's stomach lurches at the mention of Ginny again, jealousy flaring hot and sharp. "You sure that's a good idea?" he mutters, feeling a bitter taste of doubt on his tongue. "I mean, what if -"

"Don't overthink it," Neil all but orders, voice firm but not unkind. "This is your chance to talk to him. No games, no pretending. Just be honest with each other – for once."

The idea of finally talking to Charlie, of finally hashing everything out, both scares and thrills him. Knox's heart constricts inside his chest, and he swallows hard, despite the thickness in his throat. He draws in a shaky breath, looking up at Neil who's already watching him, with a calm certainty.

"I'll try," Knox mutters, "I'll talk to him."

Neil smiles, giving him one last reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Good. Trust me, you've got nothing to lose."

Knox takes a sip from his drink, trying not to wince as he swallows it down. It's beer and he gravely dislikes beer, but it's the only thing the others allowed him to have, so Knox isn't complaining. At least he has some form of alcohol to help him through the night. He hasn't seen Charlie yet, and he's not sure whether he should count it as a blessing or not.

Knox brings the glass to his lips again, already grimacing. He lets his eyes wonder around the room, taking in the lively crowd, dancing beneath the towering Christmas tree, which dominates the living room with its thousand twinkling lights and delicate silver and blue ornaments. The soft glow of the lights overhead reflects off the strands of gold tinsel draped around the expansive room. Evergreen garlands

hang gracefully from the chandelier, while the warm, comforting scents of cinnamon and pine fill the air.

“Should you be drinking?”

Knox startles and the glass shakes in his hand, sending beer over the rim, staining his fingers and the shirt-cuff of his left hand. He grumbles under his breath, as he turns around to find Chris standing behind him, arms crossed, one blond eyebrow perfectly arched.

“Oh, hello to the lovely hostess!” Knox bids, with a lopsided grin that feels only slightly forced “You look...”

“Fabulous? Amazing? A mirage to gawk upon?” she teases, twirling a bit to show off her emerald, green velvet dress. The Christmas lights catch on the ruby that rests on her clavicle.

“All of the above.”

Chris offers him a wide grin. “Well, well, you don’t clean up too bad yourself,” she quips, eyeing his outfit.

“Thank you,” he mutters, dropping his eyes to the floor.

“Are you here alone?”

Knox hesitates, draws a swig from his beer to buy himself some time. “Uh, the rest of the poets are somewhere – around here... probably lost in the crowd.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Chris says, folding her arms over her chest once more.

“Oh,” Knox sighs. “Charlie is not with me, if that’s what you mean.”

“What happened? Last time I saw you, you were about to confess your undying love!”

“Yeah, well....” a bitter chuckle breaks out of his mouth. “That didn’t go exactly as planned. Charlie broke up with me,” he shrugs, like it’s not a big deal, his his whole chest doesn’t ache speaking those words out loud. “Although, technically, I’m not even sure it counts as a break-up, considering it was fake to begin with, so...”

Chris gasps, immediately coming closer to him. “Oh, honey!” she reaches for his arm, concern flooding her expression. “Did he at least give you a reason? Is it because he doesn’t feel the same?”

Knox rubs the back of his neck with his free hand. “We never got to that part.”

Chris frowns, clearly puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“He didn’t tell me how he felt, and I never told him either,” Knox mutters, his voice growing quieter.

“What do you *mean* ?” Chris repeats, sounding exasperated.

“I tried talking to Charlie about my feelings…” Knox starts, shifting his weight between his feet, “But the minute I got him to sit still, telling him we needed to talk, he went first and said we should break up.”

Chris’ eyes widen, comically so. “Wait - you didn’t tell him you are in love with him?”

“Ugh, no,” Knox admits, and the hand that’s still on his nape, tugs at the short hair there.

“Knox! What’s the matter with you!” Chris smacks his arm, and it’s supposed to be playful, but there’s enough force behind it to make a point.

“Hey, hey, can we keep the smacking me around to a minimum?” Knox jumps away, putting some distance between him and Chris’ left hook.

“No! Knox – you were supposed to tell him!”

“I tried! Every time I opened my mouth, he’d cut me off. He kept going on about how happy he is that *we* seem to be doing so well with each other!”

Chris gives him an incredulous look. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah, thank you! That was my exact reaction!” Knox throws his hands up in frustration. “But no matter what I said, he wouldn’t listen.”

Chris lets out a loud, exaggerated groan. “Oh, you’re both so infuriating!”

Knox is far too tired to even try to defend himself. “I know.”

Chris pinches the bridge of her nose. “If I could just lock you two in a room-” she abruptly cuts herself off, ruby red lips twisting into a

smirk. “Oh, oh! Come with me!”

“What? Where?” Knox’s eyes widen as she grabs his arm, tugging him toward the far end of the room.

“No questions now, just keep walking!” she orders, weaving through the crowd.

Knox stumbles, nearly tripping over his feet in his attempt to follow her. Chris cuts through the crowd with the sort of determination he lacks, and Knox mumbles quick apologies to the disgruntled party goers they end up pushing left and right. They finally come to a halt in a quieter corner of the mansion, at the very back. Knox’s heart skips when his eyes land on Ginny and Charlie standing in close conversation. He feels the familiar lick of jealousy flare in his chest, his mind flashing back to last week – back to Ginny and Charlie kissing at another party.

“Hello, Gins, Charlie!” Chris’ voice cuts through Knox’s thoughts. “Have you two been having fun?” she asks brightly, her voice the epitome of innocence.

Charlie, who’s clearly very uncomfortable, shrugs. “It’s been alright.”

“Just alright?” Ginny gasps next to him. “I think miss Noel and I actually outdid ourselves!”

Chris grins. “Oh, this one will be definitely going down in the books by the end of the night!” She says, throwing a wink at her friend.

“Don’t I know it?” Ginny laughs, but it quickly dies out. “Did you come here to dance with me, babes?” she asks, eyeing Chris. “Cuz this one is an absolutely lousy dance partner.”

“I don’t dance.” Charlie says deadpan, just as Knox murmurs, “Charlie doesn’t dance.”

“Yeah, no hearing it twice doesn't make it any better,” Ginny says with a shake of her head. Her sharp gaze turns to Knox, pink lips pulling into a smirk that shows teeth. “I’m Ginny Danbury, by the way, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

She doesn’t extend her hand for a shake and Knox doesn’t either.

“Knox. Overstreet.”

“It’s a pleasure for the both of you, I’m sure!” Chris speaks, before the awkwardness get a chance to choke him. “Gins, I’ll dance with you in a minute, right now I need to borrow Charlie really quick.”

“What for?” Charlie asks, cocking an eyebrow and Knox feels his stomach twisting at the sight.

He tries to convince himself it's a coincidence that Charlie hasn't looked at him once.

“I need help with something at the wine cellar,” Chris responds, her voice dripping with fake sweetness.

“The wine cellar?” Charlie doesn’t sound convinced.

“Yeah, my parents are kind of obsessed with it, and I want to make sure that no one has broken in there.”

“And you can’t just take Knox with you?” Charlie says and Knox curses himself for the thrill that goes through him when Charlie speaks his name.

Chris flashes him a sparkly grin. “I’d feel safer with two men instead of one. Please?”

“Oh, you don’t have to ask twice, cherry-pie!” Ginny cuts in. “He is coming with you, of course.”

Charlie looks between the two women. “I am?”

“Yes, you are. A proper gentleman doesn’t abandon a lady in distress,” Ginny says, her eyes gleaming.

Charlie sighs. “She’s hardly in distress.”

“Oh but I am! Very much so. Very much,” Chris declares dramatically. “Come, Charlie, we’ll be quick!”

Before Charlie can protest further, Chris grabs him by the arm, dragging both him and Knox through the crowd and down the stairs. When they reach the wine cellar, Chris flings the door open and gestures inside.

“After you, boys,” she says sweetly.

Knox steps in, followed by Charlie, who’s eyes Chris suspiciously.

The moment they're both inside, Chris grins, winks and slams the door shut behind them with a click.

Knox blinks. "Did she just -?"

"Yes," Charlie mutters, glaring at the locked door. "Yes, she did."

"I didn't think she was actually going to do it," Knox murmurs, still not fully processing the situation. His stomach churns, the walls of the small room suddenly feeling way too close.

Charlie rounds at him. "You knew about this?" He scoffs, shaking his head. "Of course, you knew about this."

Knox flinches, his hands automatically going to the cuffs of his shirt, fidgeting. "I didn't know she'd lock us in here, Charlie. I just told her I couldn't get you to sit still long enough to—"

Charlie cuts him off, his voice slicing through Knox's words like a knife. "Why would you be telling your girlfriend about me?" The word *girlfriend* comes out like it burns his mouth, his gaze sharp enough to make Knox's skin crawl.

Knox's irritation slowly reares its head. "She is not my girlfriend!" he snaps. "Charlie, just – Chris and I are not together! I don't *want* to be with her!"

Charlie's eyes narrow as he scoffs, and it prickles the ugly feeling that has started bubbling in Knox's belly. "That's a different tune from what you were tooting last week."

Knox stares at him, confusion bubbling up alongside the irritation. "What? What are you even talking about?"

Charlie's lips pull into an angry smirk that looks more like a sneer. "You were too shit-faced to remember climbing on the kitchen table and declaring your undying love for -"

"For you," the words blurt out of his mouth, before Knox has a chance to stop them. "I was talking about you, you dumbass!"

Charlie's mouth snaps a couple of times, but no words come out. Knox can feel the pressure build inside him, all the feelings he's been trying to speak the past couple of weeks, ready to erupt like a volcano. His chest tightens, as he stands there, trapped in this small room.

Charlie shakes his head. “No, no that’s not -”

Knox steps forward. “I might’ve been shit-faced, as you so eloquently put it, but I know who I was talking about, Charlie!” Knox speaks over him again, his voice shaking with barely contained emotion.

Charlie stiffens, his jaw tightening. His eyes darken, his expression hardening, like he’s bracing himself. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” he mutters darkly.

“Don’t! Don’t you dare tell me what I feel, Dalton!” Knox’s voice rises, sharp and accusing, but it’s not just anger – it's hurt. He’s hurt, and he’s scared, and he’s tired of pretending this *thing* between him and Charlie is not killing him.

“You’re being impossible -”

“Oh shut up! I’m being *impossible* ? You’ve been avoiding me for *weeks* !” Knox yells, throwing his hands in the air. “Every time I so much as open my mouth, you run away! I deserve better than this, Charlie!”

Charlie’s head jerks up at that, his eyes narrowing and finally, *finally,* he looks at Knox. “What do you want me to say? That I’m sorry? That I don’t know what the hell I’m doing?”

“No,” Knox’s voice drops, the anger giving way to something more vulnerable, something more desperate. He steps closer, fists clenching at his sides. His pulse is beating in his throat, erratic and irregular, the air between them crackling. “I want you to be honest. You owe me that much.”

“Honest?” Charlie scoffs, pushing off the wall he’d been leaning against. His anger flares, matching Knox’s. “You want honesty? Fine – I pushed you away because I can’t do this, Knox. I can’t feel this way about you.”

Knox pauses, his next breath catching in his throat. “Feel what way?”

Something raw and furius flickers in Charlie’s eyes. “Like this,” he spits out, voice rough and trembling. “Like I care too much. Like I can’t think straight when you are around. Like I can’t -*fuck* - like I can’t imagine being away from you for more than five minutes. I couldn’t keep pretending when it – when it was too real for me.”

Knox stares at him, the truth hitting him like a punch to the gut. “You’re such a dumbass,”he breathes, stepping closer again. His pulse

is racing in his throat, and he's barely holding himself together. "That is exactly how I feel."

Charlie's eyes widen, a flash of panic flickers over his face. He steps back. "No."

Knox stares, confused. "What do you mean no?" he asks, taking another step toward him, frustration surging through his veins.

"No, you don't, you can't."

"Charlie..." the name falls from his lips, half exasperated, half reverent, the feeling storming through Knox's body too entangled to make sense of them.

Charlie's face twists with something like pain, but his eyes are still blazing as they pin him down. "You're being cruel right now, Knox. Stop it."

Knox's heart clenches. "I'm not!" he shouts, his voice breaking. "I've been in love with you for *months*, but you never gave me the chance to tell you."

Charlie shakes his head the whole time Knox speaks. "No, no you're not. You are confused, you want Chris and because you can't have her, you're settling -"

"I don't want *her*! I want you!" Knox is shouting now, his fists clenched, his whole body shaking with frustration and the sheer *need* to be heard. "I'm in love with *you*!"

Charlie's eyes go wide, his breath catching in his throat. But instead of stepping closer, he stumbles back, pressing a hand to his mouth. "You're not, you're not, shut up!" Charlie sounds almost delirious, his hands going through his hair, as if hoping the motion will ground him.

"Don't tell me what I feel!" Knox screams, the frustration boiling over. His throat feels tight, and all the muscles in his body are taut, shoulders tense as the bow of an arrow, fists clenched.

Knox is not sure who moves in first. All he knows is that one second he is shaking with pure furry, and the second Charlie's hands are grabbing at the collar of shirt pulling him in for a kiss. There's nothing gentle about it. It's all lips and teeth – the two of them attacking each other with the intent to leave bruises. Knox's head spins with how

wrong and right it feels all at once.

Knox's hands move to Charlie's face, one of them sneaking around his neck, the other one resting on the underside of his jaw, tilting his head to deepen the kiss. Charlie moans into his mouth, and Knox feels the tremor all the way to his toes. His heart is pounding into his chest, like it's trying to escape and burrow itself in Charlie's.

Knox feels like he is unravelling when Charlie's hand drags down his chest, stopping just above his belt. His fingers flex around Charlie's neck, and he pushes him backward, until his back hits on the wall. Charlie groans, throws his head back to give Knox undisturbed access to his neck.

It's all too much, but so fucking good. Blood and want travel south inside Knox's body, and his presence of mind is so absent that he doesn't feel the slightest bit of embarrassment when he rolls his hips forward, brushing against Charlie's crotch. Charlie shudders underneath his fingers, a low, hungry noise escaping his parted lips. Charlie's fingers start to trail their way across Knox's lower abdomen, pressing his thumb into the curve where his hipbone turns into a sharp V.

Fuck, Knox is so turned on and he can *feel* Charlie's own arousal, the both of them hard in their dress pants, panting and kissing wantonly in the middle of the room. His mind has been full of flashing memories of every single time Charlie has rendered him speechless the past couple of months, all the times Charlie's trademark smirk has ignited a fire in the pit of his stomach, all the times he'd been this close to throwing caution to the wind and pouncing at the other man.

Like he is currently doing.

Knox's hand slides into Charlie's hair, and he pulls until he knows it must be painful. A groan fills the room, and Knox feels it straight in his growing erection. He wants to ruin Charlie's carefully picked clothes, he wants Charlie to *choke* on his fingers, he wants to watch him writhe in his lap and most of all he wants to fuck his fucking *asshole* of a best friend into the next week.

The thought has just entered his mind, planting roots deep inside Knox's brain, when Charlie suddenly shoves him away, hard enough that Knox stumbles back a step, breath ragged.

"No, no, no," Charlie mutters, shaking his head as if he's trying to

shake off the entire moment.

Knox's desperation spikes. "Char, *please,"* he all but begs, making a move to get close to him, but Charlie throws a hand out, stopping him in his tracks.

Charlie's face is flushed, his chest heaving, but his eyes... his eyes are filled with panic, with fear. "No," he gasps, shaking his head. "No, this can't happen. This isn't..."

"Please, don't do this," Knox is aware that he is begging at his point. He doesn't care. "You don't have to keep running."

But Charlie is shaking his head, again, backing toward the door. "I can't Knox. I can't do this."

"Yes, you can," Knox's voice cracks. He feels like the ground has been ripped from under him. "Yes, you can, Char, *please, please* ."

"What happens next, Knox?" Charlie's voice is sharper now, his eyes turning cold. "You love the chase, but the minute you get someone you don't know what to do with them."

Knox jerks back, stunned. The words hit harder than they should, despite knowing that Charlie is only lashing out because he feels cornered. "That's uncalled for, Char."

"Is it?" Charlie challenges, his tone harsh now, riding on the edge of desperation. "I've seen you bounce between relationship for the last six years; every time you're convinced they're the one, and every time you end up broken hearted."

Knox's chest tightens, words catching in his throat. "That's not -" Knox stops, presses his lips into a thin line, when he feels his voice is about to crack. "That won't happen with us."

Charlie's laugh is bitter, hollow. "No? It won't happen when the sexual tension dies down? When we start fighting? I'm used to people fucking off into the sunset, but I won't survive it if you do it. I can't lose you, Knox."

"You're losing me right now," Knox speaks softly, and he sounds already defeated to his ears. "If you keep pushing me away, you're going to lose me anyway."

Charlie stands there, silent, staring at the ground like he can't bring

himself to meet Knox's eyes. His shoulders are shaking, his breath uneven. "I'm sorry," he whispers, and Knox knows – he knows this is the part where Charlie walks away.

He watches as Charlie takes another step toward the door, spinning around and fumbling with the lock.

His heart thumps relentlessly in his throat, and Knox is half-certain he's going to throw up. "Charlie, don't," he pleads, his voice barely above a whisper.

The lock gives away with a soft click. For a brief, agonizing second, Charlie hesitates, his shoulder tense.

For a fleeting moment Knox hopes he will stay.

But the second passes.

And Charlie walks out the door without looking back.

Knox doesn't follow him.

Chapter End Notes

Yiddish translation :

Royk arop, nudkin! : Calm down, you nuisance!

All you need is Love? Charlie? (Both?) Both.

Chapter Notes

> Okay, this is ch12, I repeat; this is ch12. How the HELL did we get here? When I started this story I was in a whole ass different country, I - I don't know what to say, really! I'm so moved by the love you've shown for this little fic, so moved by your reviews your likes, your bookmarks! I love you for loving this story so much, for loving Knox and Charlie as much as I do, for putting up with their antics and my writing for as long as you have!! I hope this last chapter doesn't feel underwhelming, and that you feel it wraps up the story nicely, because I feel like it does! I am planing to write more stories in this universe, so fret not. This may be the ending of this story, but there are more to come! So, without further ado, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knox is twenty years old and he is going through his worst heart break yet.

It's Christmas and they're supposed to be hosting a party, but Knox feels too down on himself to actively participate. Normally he'd be one of the first ones to don his most precious festive ugly sweater – the one with the cartoon reindeer, and join the awkward dance competition that Meeks insisted they hosted – after winning the one held by the theater department a week ago. Any other day he'd be the first to jump in. But tonight, he feels like he's in the eye of the storm, with festive lights and familiar faces swirling around him while he stands frozen in the center.

He is sitting on the corner of their second-hand leather couch, feeling sorry for himself, when Pitts plops down next to him, with a glint in his eyes that promises nothing but trouble.

"I know what you're gonna say," Knox says, the moment Pitts opens his mouth. "I should 'forget about all that, nudnik! Drink, dance, fuck a stranger! It's Christmas time!" He does his best imitation of Pitts' booming voice, though it ends in a mumble.

"First off I don't sound like that," Pitts says, arching his eyebrows, before his face splits into a blinding grin. "And second, that sounds like solid advice! I knew I was good at those!" Pitts claps him on the shoulder, and Knox grimaces at the touch but only slightly. "Knoxie, it's Christmas -"

“We are Jewish.”

“Even better! You can sin in the name of Christianity and repent in like a week when Hanukkah starts! See? Win-win.” Pitts gives a smug nod, crossing his arms.

Knox huffs, his shoulders slumping further. “Pitts.”

“Knox.”

“This is serious, okay? I just... I just can’t believe she did it over a video call! A video call?” Knox looks down at his lap, his hands flexing into fists. “She told me she was getting married over a video call, Gerard!”

Pitts frowns “Gerard? Right, okay, we need alcohol!” Pitts claps his hands, jumping off the couch and rushing towards the drinks table, before Knox can even begin to protest.

And that’s how he finds himself doing Candy Cane Jell-O shots, sitting next to Pitts on their shitty couch. The party swells around them, and the first shot slips down warm and syrupy sweet. Pitts is busy, talking to someone sitting on the other side of him, and Knox has to lean into his space in order to talk to him.

“And it’s not just that she’s getting remarried,” Knox’s voice drops into a mumble, as he tries not to lean his body weight of Pitts. “She’s getting married to Dad’s old partner - his college best friend!” He murmurs, the words barely above a whisper, the thrum of the party drowning them out. His chest feels tight, and Knox has no idea how to make it better, the knot of resentment and hurt tangled too tightly to be loosened even by Pitts’ valiant attempts.

“Okay, enough whining about your mom’s love life, alright?” Pitts says, voice loud but not unsympathetic, passing him another glass. “Here, this will clear your head.”

Knox stares at the drink, swirls it as he watches tiny bubbles rise to the surface. “What’s this?”

Pitts grins, wiggling his eyebrows.“It’s a Tom and Jerry!”

“A Tom and what?”

“Eggnog with a kick! Meeks’ secret and best recipe. C’mon, bottoms up!”

It tastes like spiced clouds, somehow both richer and stronger than he

expected. It's excessively sweet, and Knox's tongue sticks in his mouth, but it satisfies his sweet-tooth and it sets a tingle all the way down to his toes.

Knox downs the whole thing in two long swings.

"Now you're getting the hang of it," Pitts murmurs encouragingly, handing him another glass. Knox's face heats up at the random praise, and he brings the rim to his lips, taking a sip. The warmth that spreads down his throat quickly reaches his chest, and Knox doesn't know how or why, but it silences the voices in his head.

It's like he's finally catching up with the glow of the room. The music sounds louder and livelier, Knox's lips stretch into a smile and he even finds himself laughing at something that Pitts says. The Bluetooth speaker on the coffee table starts playing Britney's 'Santa can you hear me?" and Knox whoops excitedly. Pitts drags him to his feet and they start dancing around, all unsynchronized long limps, and nonsensical headbangs.

Knox is on his third Tom and Jerry and his stomach is drowning in syrup, bourbon and warmth. The edges of his vision start to pleasantly blur, the vibrant whirl of red and green lights around the room more hazy than dizzying now. Pitts has disappeared somewhere into the crowd, leaving Knox to his thoughts – or in the complete absence of them.

He faintly hears someone call his name, but the music is too loud, and Knox is finally buzzed enough to sway to the sound of it without his mother's voice resounding inside his skull. His eyes sink shut, and Knox brings the glass to his mouth, craving the warmth it offers, accepting the alcoholic comfort that helps push away any thought of her new life.

Before he can tip the glass back there are fingers wrapping around his wrist, stalling his move.

Someone leans carefully into his personal space, their breath caressing his ear. "I think you've had enough," there's a lilt in Charlie's voice that betrays his amusement, even as he tries to sound exasperated.

Under normal circumstances, Knox would've pulled away by now. He would've shrugged Charlie's hand away, and laugh to make his awkwardness less apparent. Instead, his eyes snap open and he stares, momentarily stunned, at where their hands meet. Charlie's fingers are warm, if not a little rough from hours spent gripping the rowing oars, but the weight of them against Knox's skin grounds him in a way he didn't expect.

Knox blinks, as if trying to physically recall himself.

“No, no, no, give it back,” he protests, his fingers flexing around empty air, since Charlie has already confiscated his glass. “Char,” he whines, the nickname effortlessly falling from his mouth, lower lip jutting out.

Charlie lifts the glass, holding it just out of Knox’s reach, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. Knox watches as he brings the drink to his lips tipping it back and swallowing the whole thing. “Oops.”

Charlie’s smile is positively devilish and Knox feels a strange kick in his stomach at the sight of it.

Knox stares at him, his mouth hanging open as he tries to figure out his next words. “Why would you do that?” he asks, and he sounds almost horrified.

“Because you’ve had more than enough,” Charlie says, disposing of Knox’s now empty glass. He presses his lips together, his tongue darting out to lick over them briefly, and Knox chokes a little on his own spit.

Charlie doesn’t notice.

Knox shakes his head, “No, I haven’t,” he protests, but the motion sends a bout of dizziness through him and Knox stumbles. He blindly reaches for something to steady him, and he feels a hand grabbing at his elbow, stopping his freefall. “Okay, that didn’t mean anything.”

Charlie looks entirely too amused as he smirks at him. “Sure, it didn’t.”

“Charlie, I’m fine,” he speaks slowly, trying to sound steady, all his focus on holding their eye contact. Charlie’s grip tightens around his arm, fingers pressing through the fabric of Knox’s sweater, grounding him even as his pulse races.

“Of course you’re fine,” Charlie mutters, guiding him through the crowd, like Knox is a lost child. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Knox sways against him, feeling the firmness of Charlie’s shoulder and wondering – not for the first time – what it would feel like to lean all the way in, to let himself get lost in Charlie and trust him enough to guide him somewhere safe. It’s a thought that prickles, digs at something he’s buried deep and long ago, something that threatens to resurface.

“Are you propositioning me, Dalton?” Knox slurs with a wide grin, and there’s a spark of challenge behind his words that he hopes Charlie can’t see.

He's only half-joking.

Charlie laughs and it's maybe a little too loud, a little too forced, but Knox is thoroughly buzzed and he can't tell for sure. Still, there's something in the silence that spreads between them, something that crackles with energy, something that feels alive and scary, that's been building since – what, since he was sixteen?

Oh.

Oh, he thinks, his eyes slipping down to Charlie's mouth, I like him.

And there it is, suspended in the air, like a neon sign – the admission he's avoided for years. He's always known, in pieces, but tonight it feels different, more solid, like it's pulsing in his bloodstream. Tonight, he's full of sharp-edged anger and too much heat – tonight Knox feels more reckless than usual.

"Hey, I can hold my alcohol just fine!" Knox protests when Charlie insinuates – flat out tells him - that he can't, stopping dead in his tracks. Someone passes him with a tray full of red cups, and Knox grabs one at random.

"Knox, listen to me -" Charlie starts, but Knox is fed up with this version of Charlie, and so, he completely ignores him by tipping the glass back and swallowing its contents.

Knox smirks, eyes gleaming. "Watch gonna do now, Chuck?" He taunts, meeting Charlie's eyes with a challenging grin.

The music swells drowning out whatever Charlie throws out as an answer. Knox's eyes fall to his lips, watching them curve around his vowels and he swallows, his throat suddenly thick. He catches only the tail end of his sentence; '- trying to prove, Knoxie?"

He goes for aloof, shrugging his shoulders. "Nothin."

Charlie's eyes momentarily narrow, he is undoubtfully about to go off on him, but Knox is too busy watching the twinkling Christmas' lights catch in his eyes. They're not exactly brown, too light to call them that, but they're neither green nor blue.

Pewter, his mind supplies.

Then Charlie says it – Leo's name spoken almost like a curse as he mocks Knox's latest spiel. And Knox feels the warmth drain from his cheeks,

replaced by something cold, something defensive.

“ - out of the blue, Charlie? He was the love of my life -”

“I never said that last one,” the words break out without his consent, and he can tell his face is starting to heat up. His fingers pick at the cuff of his sweater, as he notices the incredulous look on Charlie’s face.

Is that what he thought? That Knox was in love with Leo? That he was so distraught over their break up that he’d decided to drink himself silly?

Knox’s mouth opens, the urge to set the record straight bubbling up. He wants to tell him everying; about his mom, about the video call – she's getting married to Robert! Remember Robert, my dad’s bestie who took us fishing my first year in Welton? Yeah, that’s gonna be my new step-dad! Who gives a rat’s ass about Leo, Charlie?

But then Charlie groans.

Any and all logical thought inside Knox’s brain screeches into a halt.

Charlie looks utterly exasperated with him, but all Knox can think is what he needs to say to make him make that sound again.

“The point is, I know a Knox who’s trying to drink someone out of his system, and as a good friend, Imma stop him.”

Right; Charlie still thinks he’s moping about Leo.

With an exasperated sigh, Knox’s head falls back. The motion makes nebulas explode behind his closed eyes. “Charlie,” he whines, feeling his frustration spike. His brain is still pleasantly buzzed, by Meeks’ Tom and Jerries, but Knox can feel his consciousness ready to return with a vengeance, aided by Charlie’s crusade against Knox’s right to drink.

He is about to tell him he should loosen up – it's Christmas, dude – but then Charlie yelps loudly, and Knox’s head snaps in alert far too fast, giving him a whiplash.

The room swims dangerously around him, while Charlie’s exchanging words with a drunk kid hanging over the banister of their staircase. Next thing he knows, Charlie’s hand is back around his elbow, pulling Knox closer to his body, as he starts leading them up the stairs.

Knox finds himself tucked underneath Charlie’s arm, his chest pressed into Charlie’s side, and his mind goes momentarily blank. It surprises him, how

natural it feels, how there's no sign of his usual discomfort at being touched. Without thinking too much about it, Knox curls his fingers around Charlie's bicep, squeezing it absently to the beat of the music.

"My arm is not an anti-stress ball, Knoxious," Charlie mutters, voice laced with humor. Knox is about to reply something hilarious, but then his foot catches on the next step and he stumbles.

Surprising even himself, he manages to not fall on his face and he laughs at Charlie's quip. "Char," he starts, giving him a sideways look, "Have I told you lately that -" a hiccup swallows his words, and Charlie raises his eyebrows as he looks at him. Knox giggles, as he continues " - that you're like, really fit?"

Charlie's footsteps falter, his grip loosening slightly as he looks away, the reaction so unexpected it makes Knox frown in confusion. Before he gets the chance to overthink it, 'Mistletoe' begins playing from the speaker in the living room, and Knox hums along under his breath, losing himself in the warmth of the moment.

"Yeah, yeah, you're drunk, Knox." Charlie says, as if that has anything to do with anything.

Knox scoffs, shaking his head. "M'not! Just... festive." He tries taking the next step, belatedly realizing he's reached the top of the stairs. His foot finds nothing but air, and he braces himself for the pain of the collision, but it never comes.

Knox feels being pulled against a hard chest, and his heart beats twice as fast. His cheeks flame up, and he hears Charlie's harsh breath brush his ear. Knox exhales shakily, glancing up with a wobbly smile."My hero," he coos exaggeratedly, trying to save face.

Charlie huffs, his voice weirdly strained when he speaks. "Alright, that's enough. It's high time we get you to bed, before you say something you'll regret in the morning."

Knox purses his lips. "I don't regret the things I say."

Charlie spares him a long, tired look, before pushing the door to Knox's bedroom open, motioning for him to go inside. Charlie kicks the door closed behind their backs, steering Knox gently toward his bed. Knox manages one whole step, but then he trips over his own feet, going crushing down onto his bed. He bounces on the mattress once, attempting to tug the duvet down with one hand and kick off his shoes with the other. Somehow he finds himself tangled into the bending in a matter of seconds, the duvet

so tightly wrapped around his chest that it's almost uncomfortable.

"Charlie, the bed is killing me!" Knox cries, only half-joking, flailing in the covers. "Help me!"

Charlie watches him with an exasperated sigh, taking his time before approaching like he's handling a wild animal. He steps closer, one arm extended in front of him, and the first thing he does is pin both of Knox's arms tightly above his head. Knox feels a hot, heavy flush creep up his face, and he clears his throat, praying Charlie will mistake it for embarrassment at his predicament. Charlie frees him from his duvet prison, and Knox expects him to pull away, but he hesitates. It's only for a second, but Knox feels time warp around them, with Charlie almost straddling his lap, knees pressing lightly against Knox's sides, his hands firmly gripping Knox's wrists above his head.

Knox feels faint.

The spell breaks with Charlie clearing his throat, his fingers brushing against Knox's skin before pulling away.

"Right," Charlie says, dragging the word out as he stands up. "I'm going to get you some water and a Tylenol, and then I'll see you in the morning."

Knox watches him, an amused smile tugging at his lips. He's keenly aware of the warmth in his chest, a boldness bubbling up from somewhere he hadn't expected. Maybe it's the drinks, maybe it's Charlie's unfamiliar awkwardness, or maybe it's a third elusive thing that Knox lacks the brain capacity to think about. Whatever it is, it makes him feel reckless, like he could say anything and get away with it.

Propping himself up on his elbows, Knox lets his gaze roam over Charlie's body, a teasing glint lighting his eyes. "Charlie," he murmurs, purposefully dropping his voice. "Provoco te ad me suavium."

Charlie freezes, the look of utter confusion on his face causing Knox's stomach to twist with excitement. His lips pull into an unfamiliar smirk that's all sharp edges.

"I... What?" Charlie stammers, clearly at a loss, his brow furrowing.

"Provoco te ad me suavium, Char," he repeats, murmuring the words with a silky voice. He watches in fascination as Charlie's pupils blow wide, his expression torn between curiosity and shock.

"That's... Latin, isn't it?" There's a questioning lilt to Charlie's sentence,

despite him already knowing the answer, and Knox simply smirks in response. “You know I hate Latin, Overstreet.”

Knox leans back on his elbows, letting a small sigh. “Mmm, what a shame.”

“What did you say?” Charlie asks, and there’s an obvious hesitation to his voice that Knox can hear even in his intoxicated state.

Knox’s smirk returns, curling at his lips. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” He teases, wondering what else he could get away with if he simply chose to translate everything to Latin.

“You’re shit-faced, Knoxious,” Charlie chuckles, but it sounds forced. “You should get some sleep.”

“No wait!” Knox all but lunges across the bed, his hand wrapping around Charlie’s arm, pulling him down. It takes Knox a second to realize how out of character he is being, initiating physical contact so freely, but then his brain catches on -

Charlie is in his lap.

More specifically, Charlie’s ass is in his lap.

“Hey, there,” Knox says with a playful smirk, even though his heartbeat is hammering in his chest. Charlie’s breath crushes into his face, and Knox feels like he is a second away from having a complete mental break down. He busies himself, noticing how Charlie’s normally fair complexion turns scarlet.

“Hey, buddy,” Charlie pats him awkwardly on the shoulder, and he makes a move to get up, but Knox suavely slips an arm across his abdomen, holding him there.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Knox tries to keep his tone light and joking, but the words catch in his throat as soon as his gaze meets Charlie’s.

Something entirely too vulnerable flashes there and it takes Knox by surprise. This version of Charlie feels like a hidden door he’s stumbled upon, an invitation he never expected, and his chest tightens with the thrill of it. The urge to see more, to dive deeper into this unguarded side of his best friend, coils inside him, fierce and unrelenting. He wants to keep this side of Charlie, to treasure it like a secret talisman.

It’s in this vein of raw want, of more, more, more that Knox reaches up, his

fingers curling around the nape of Charlie's neck, blunt nails scratching his skin. He pulls Charlie down, heart pounding as he closes the distance, with the intend of crashing their lips together. There's a faint smell of tobacco and bourbon – Charlie's not as sober as he claimed to be, and Knox wonders what Charlie's lips taste like. But his own aim, dulled by the alcohol, falters, and he ends up sloppily brushing his lips over the corner of Charlie's mouth instead.

Charlie's sharp intake of breath is like a jolt of electricity, his eyes widening in surprise. But before Knox can rectify his botched attempt, Charlie has pushed him at arm's length, blinking rapidly.

"Knox!" H e gasps, a mix of shock and confusion coloring his voice. "What the hell…" His words drift off as if he's searching for some anchor.

Knox braces himself for the wave of mortification, but it never comes. Charlie's reaction isn't strong enough to mean rejection, just surprise, and the realization fuels Knox's courage. He knows he'll have another chance, that Charlie's not upset just caught off guard, so he lets his eyes flutter shut, a satisfied, dreamy smile curling on his lips as he sways slightly.

"Nunc scio, quid sit Amor," he murmurs, and yeah, okay he's maybe feeling a bit mushy, but he is the only one who knows that.

Charlie's attempt at an amused snort—barely successful—only confirms it.

"Okay, you menace, time to get some sleep," he huffs, as he rolls off the bed and out of Knox's lap.

The absence of Charlie's warmth hits Knox immediately, leaving a dull ache behind. Knox's hand instinctively reaches out, catching Charlie's wrist before he can move too far. Through heavy-lidded eyes, he looks up, his gaze soft but accusing. "You didn't kiss me back." His body feels weighted, his limbs relaxing into the mattress as he lies back, but his hand stubbornly holds onto Charlie's, his fingers curling weakly.

"Next time," Charlie whispers, so soft its almost lost.

"Promise?" Knox asks, a mixture of challenge and pleading woven into his voice. He cracks an eye open, willing Charlie to say something, anything, that will give him hope.

"Night night, Knoxie," Charlie says, instead of giving him a proper answer.

His fingers fall away from Charlie's wrist, heavy and numb, and he lets out

a low, half-mumbled laugh. “Sine te non potero vivere, Char,” he mutters into the pillow, more for himself than for Charlie. "A te principium, tibi desinam.”

The words feel hollow, like he’s testing them out, trying to make sense of them—trying to make sense of everything. Tomorrow, he tells himself, somewhere between a scoff and a smirk. Tomorrow, maybe he’ll get a real answer, or at least some explanation for whatever the hell tonight was.

For now, it’s all just noise in his head, and he’s too tired to pick it apart.

Morning arrives far too soon. Knox groans, twirling around in his bed, trying to get away from the sunlight filtering in through the curtains. It’s a useless task, but still Knox keeps at it, until all of his bedding gets twisted around him like a vice. He groans before even opening his eyes, memories of last night’s emotional turmoil weighing down his limbs like lead. He peeks at the watch on his nightstand, letting go of an even louder groan when he realizes he has only slept for three hours.

Knox draws a deep breath as he drags a hand down his face. He tries to swallow down his surging panic, pushing himself into a seated position and shaking off the remnants of exhaustion. With only two days ahead of him before they all split up for the Christmas’ vacation, Knox knows he’s running out of time.

From getting off his bed to getting out of the shower everything is a blur. Knox is in autopilot mode, ticking tasks out of a list, eager to get to the next one. By the time he is blow drying his hair he has formed a semi-coherent plan. Well, not a plan exactly, it’s barely even a ‘pla’, but it’s the best that he can come up with.

Pushing his growing anxiety at the back of his mind, Knox struts into Meeks' room without even knocking. His heart is racing inside his chest, like he’s ran a mile, and his palms are getting sweaty. Meeks barely looks up from the book he is reading, sprawled out on his bed. He kinks an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. “I was wondering when you’d come find me.”

Knox swallows hard, his throat tight. “I didn’t want to make this break-up feel like everyone’s problem.” He runs a hand through his hair, feeling his shoulder slumping under the weight.

Going to Meeks was Knox’s Hail Mary. Before even going to take a shower he’d tried Neil’s room, desperate for his friend’s gentle

approach and endless optimism, only to find out that Charlie had barricaded himself in there hours ago. So, since Neil was out, there was only one remaining resource of infinite wisdom when it came to dealing with Charlie Dalton; Steven Meeks – brilliant, practical, occasionally terrifying Meeks, who never sugarcoated anything.

“I know you’ve already asked for advice elsewhere,” Meeks quips, placing a bookmark between the pages of his book before flipping it shut. “It’s honestly kinda hurtful that you went to Perry first, but whatever, at least I’m glad we’re done with the whole ‘everything is fake, we are not really ridiculously attracted to each other.”

“Yeah, well -” Knox’s voice cracks, as soon as the words fully register to his brain. “Wait, what?” He blinks, disbelief mixing with the dull ache in his chest.

Meeks blinks back at him. “What?”

“You knew?” Knox breathes, the words barely audible, a furious flush spreading from his chest to his neck like rapid fire.

Meeks barely shrugs, but Knox's world shifts as he stares. “Um, yeah?”

“What? How? What?” The questions stumble out of his mouth, hurried just as Knox starts pacing in front of Meeks’ bed, his sock-clad feet making soft shuffling sounds against the wooden floor. Each question comes out more high-pitched than the last, his hands widely gesturing in the air.

Meeks' eyebrows raise high on his forehead as he regards him with the expression of someone who’s seen this particular brand of crisis before. “Okay, I’ll take these questions one at a time; what? I know that the two of you were fake-dating. How? I’m obviously a psychic. What? I know that you were both in love with each other, but still decided to ‘fake-date’.”

Knox stops dead in his tracks, his mouth hanging open. “You’re a psychic?”

“Of course not, you dingus!”

“Then how?” Knox tugs at the hair of his nape, slumping against Meek’s desk. He tries to keep his mind from spinning, but everything feels overwhelming and Knox can hardly breathe at this point.

Meeks takes pity on him. “You told me; the night of the prom. After you drunk a whole bottle of gin? Yeah, you found me and told me you had this wicked idea – and that’s verbatim – on how to get anderperry together.” Meeks gives him an almost sympathetic look. “Oh, and I know about them dating, as well,” he adds as an afterthought.

“Anderperry?” Knox’s voice sounds distant to his own ears, like he’s hearing himself speak from another part of the house. The room feels too hot, too small, and he tugs at the neck of his sweater.

“That’s what Charlie and I call Todd and Neil behind their backs.”

“Okay... wait, how do you know about Neil and Todd? And what do you mean I told you at Prom. *Fuck* , my head hurts.” Knox presses his palms against his temples, sliding down to sit on the floor. The cold seeping from the wood to his skin is grounding enough to stop the room from spinning.

Meeks shrugs from his spot atop the bed. “It’s simple really; Neil and Todd are shit at lying and coming up with excuses, and you can’t hold your alcohol.”

Knox makes a sound halfway between a groan and a whimper. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god...” Knox draws his knees close to his chest, his voice dying out. He wraps both his arms around them, hiding his face for a moment, the sound of his heart beating in overdrive the only thing that reaches his ears.

Meeks takes a small pause before saying, “If it makes you feel any better, I think I’m the only one you told. Though, I don’t know how Pitts hasn’t it all figured out yet; I mean, he was basically the one who gave you the idea!”

Knox’s head snaps up so fast he nearly gives himself whiplash. “What? No, he wasn’t!”

“Uh, yeah, he was. Remember, before the summer break when we got really high?”

“That happens a lot, so you need to be a tad more specific.” Knox forces a smile, but he’s aware of how shaky his hands are as he rakes them through his hair, leaving it sticking up in odd angles. His heartbeat pounds in his ears, his stomach flipping, every nerve in his body in high alert.

Meeks gives him a stern look, but complies none the less. “It was early

June, we were high and it was just the three of us, and Pitts was like ‘maybe we should trick them into fake dating,” Meeks says, and Knox feels his eyes slowly widening. “See? He gave you the idea.”

Knox feels the words like a punch to his gut, a sweeping realization that pulls the rug out from under him. He stares at Meeks, unblinking, as every memory of his “fake” moments with Charlie over the last few months shifts into sharper focus, turning the whole thing inside out.

He is suddenly hyper aware of his pulse thundering in his ears, his stomach twisting, twisting, twisting around itself. Bile rises up his throat, and his face blanches. “I think I’m gonna be sick,” Knox murmurs, as months of memories rearrange themselves like a kaleidoscope.

“Not in my room, dude!”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Knox’s voice sounds almost pleading. He drops his forehead to his knees, trying to steady his breathing.

“Because Charlie has been obsessing over you for the past six years and this scenario was better than watching him mope around waiting for you to get your head out of your ass.”

“Charlie has been obsessing over me?” Knox’s whole body jerks, nearly toppling over. His chest is too tight, as if the air has been sucked out of the room.

“Knox, I swear to god, I don’t know how you got the grades to get into Yale.” Meeks’ voice cuts through his spiraling thoughts.

Knox forces a chuckle. “I’m good at studying.”

“Yeah, clearly it wasn’t because of your above the average intelligence.” Meeks deadpans, and Knox knows he should at least try to defend himself, but his mind is too busy -

“Can we go back to Charlie obsessing over me?” Knox sounds eager, almost keen, a fierce need building in his voice he can’t quite control.

Meeks crosses his arms, looking at Knox with a blunt expression. “You mean to tell me you never noticed? It’s not like you were any better yourself.”

Knox’s spine instantly straightens, his face twisting in mild offense. “Excuse me?”

Meeks rolls his eyes. “Oh, *c’mon* ! You always found reasons to room with him, whenever we went on a trip! You keep flirting with him, excessively, when you get drunk – in actual *fucking Latin* ! Knox, you're comfortable with him touching you when I know for a fact you've broken up with someone because you couldn't stand them touching you all the time!”

Meeks' words press down on him, an invisible weight that makes Knox's chest constrict. His mind flashes back to that first day at Welton, him sticking to Pitts' side while Neil and Charlie strutted along to interrupt them. It flashes back to Charlie's wild grin, his calous words, the way he held himself so confidently, so smug. He remembers how Charlie's eyes kept returning to him, intrigued, even though they'd barely exchanged more than a hello. That lingering gaze, too long too intense, stealing Knox’s breath, makings his thoughts go haywire.

Six years.

Six years of Charlie’s late-night conversations, of lingering looks, of shared cigarettes and mischievous smirks. Six years of them being almost everything, but never enough.

Knox's memories rearrange themselves, slowly, painfully, shifting his perception. His heart falters inside his chest, as Knox realizes he wasn't just happy whenever Charlie came looking for him, he was fucking elated. And he didn't simply feel left out, when other people dared monopolize Charlie's attention, he was in fact burning with jealousy. And the physical contact, the one obstacle that Knox faced with all of his relationships - romantic or otherwise - didn’t just feel tolerable with Charlie; it felt *right.* More than once, he’d leaned into it, as if Charlie’s hand on his arm was the only thing keeping him steady in a world too harsh and cold.

Knox flushes, dropping his gaze to his knees. “Well, all that don’t matter since I can’t get him to talk to me,” he mutters, hugging his knees tighter against his chest.

Meeks sighs, levels him with a gaze. “Have you actually tried?” He asks, unfolding his arms to lean back on them and stretch his legs out.

“What do you think, Meeks?” He doesn’t mean for his words to come out half as exasperated as they do.

Meeks shrugs. “I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking.”

“I tried! I tried so many times, but Charlie just -” he groans, slumping forward, head hitting on his knees.

“Okay,” Meeks interrupts, his voice softening. “You need to understand a couple of things, alright?” He moves to the edge of his bed so to be closer to Knox. “You’ve been love bombing this idiot for the past two months, right? But Charlie grew up in an emotionally manipulative family, so any excessive show of love was usually followed by someone pulling the rug from under his feet. The only reason he didn’t go running for the hills sooner is because it was all play pretend. But as soon as he realized his feelings it was game over.”

Knox frowns as he takes all that in, a fresh pang of guilt tightening in his chest. He rubs at his temple, his voice cracking. “So…I should leave him be?”

Meeks huffs, shaking his head firmly. “No, that’s precisely what you shouldn’t do!”

“But you just said -”

“Knox, listen,” Meeks interrupts, his gaze firm, but the ghost of a sympathetic smile plays at his lips, “You tried talking to Charlie about your feelings, he reacted badly and as a result, you pull away. How does that sound to you?”

Knox’s stomach drops. “Like I’m one of the people fucking off into the sunset,” he mumbles.

“What?” Meeks stares at him, genuinely puzzled.

Knox swallows, his voice catching, “It’s something Charlie told me.”

“Mhmm,” Meeks nods, eyes twinkling with amusement. “He has such a way with words. A real poet.”

“Meeks.” Knox gives him a flat look, fighting back a smile despite the tension in his shoulders.

Meeks chuckles, but his gaze sharpens. “You need to talk to him. And *actually* listen to him. Don’t act like his fears are irrational, because to him they aren’t. Be nice, be understanding, don’t stress him out.”

Knox manages a wry grin, his arms dropping by his sides. “Huh, so you’re saying that locking him in a cellar and yelling at each other

wasn't the ideal conversation?"

Meeks stares at him in disbelief. "You locked him in a cellar? Who are you? Where is Knox Overstreet?"

Knox lifts his gaze to the ceiling, a hand coming to rub the back of his neck. "I uh... I might have mentioned something to Chris and she might have been the one to lock us in a cellar."

"Now that makes more sense," Meeks says. "So? Did anything happen?"

Knox's cheeks flame up, but his eyes soften with a flicker of a smile. "We kissed."

Meeks nods in approval, his grin bright enough to lit his face. "Took you long enough. You've been dating for three months!"

"*Fake* dating."

"Right... How did he take it?" He asks, his voice much softer.

Knox's expression falls, and he feels the familiar sting behind his eyes. "He freaked out. Said he couldn't do this, told me I was going to leave him, as if -"

"Knox," Meeks interrupts, trying to keep his tone gentle. "I was serious about you not mocking his fears."

Knox sighs, "I know," he mutters, rubbing a hand tiredly over his eyes. "I just... hate it when he's like that."

Meeks lets out a small, understanding sound. "He doesn't do it to hurt you."

"I know."

There's a beat of tense silence before Meeks leans over, his expression sincere. "If it counts for anything, I don't think you'd ever fuck off into the sunset and leave him behind."

Knox feels the pressure in his chest loosen, warmth spreading over him. "It does," he murmurs, a grateful smile curling in his lips. "Thank, Steve."

Meeks smiles back. "Any time, Knoxious."

Knox chuckles, rolling his eyes, but he feels his stomach slightly settle for the first time in weeks. He knows what he has to do, and he knows it will all be okay.

By lunchtime, the poets have trickled out, each vanishing with a vague excuse. Pitts is off hunting for last-minute gifts for his siblings. Meeks has to return a book to the library. Neil and Todd are sneaking off on a covert pre-holiday date. Even Cameron has found a reason to disappear, though he seems reluctant.

“I’m supposed to lie. The others told me to make up an excuse and leave,” he says, arms crossed, eyeing Knox critically from the doorway.

“Okay…” Knox replies, unsure where this is headed.

“If you mess this up any further…” Cameron’s sentence dangles ominously before he gives one last dramatic sigh and slips out the door, leaving Knox alone in the big, empty house.

It is a nice enough mid-December day; the sky is grey, with heavy looking clouds, but it isn’t raining nor snowing, and the temperature inside the house is tolerable. Knox debates ordering takeout but instead opts to keep busy by making lunch. It's a way to fill the silence, something to calm his nerves.

He always enjoyed spending time in the kitchen, preparing food. With everything going on Knox hadn’t been in there in a while, and so he decides to take his time. He ties on an apron, to avoid staining his new red sweater – he is still not used to the feel of the cashmere against his skin, the newness of it makes it extra itchy. He sets his Spotify playlist to Christmas classics, and focuses on the ritual of preparing his food.

Cooking reminds him of the only time he and his mom connected. It was usually him, Stella and Mom, bonding over cluttered counters and simmering pots, chaotic attempts at family dinners that often led to ordering pizza. But the memories make his stomach twitch, and Knox is trying to unwind, so he pushes his thoughts to the side, focusing on measuring the parmesan instead.

Lunch is a lonesome affair, just Knox and his homemade cacio e pepe in front of the tv, watching reruns of the Mandalorian. Knox doesn’t exactly hate the quiet of the house, but it somehow fills his mind with more noise, having him on the edge of his seat, knees bouncing. He finishes his food in record time, and he picks up his phone, scrolling to

Chris's number, debating whether a coffee break would do him any good. That's when he hears footsteps descending the stairs.

Knox feels his heart give an irritatingly hopeful thud, as he glances over his shoulder.

"Neil said I was being irrational last night."

Knox blinks, half-afraid that Charlie while vanish when he reopens his eyes. But no, he's still there, leaning against the doorframe, looking faintly sheepish.

"He did?" Knox's voice shakes only a little. "That's the closest his come to actually reprimanding you since the whole 2020 debacle."

Charlie scrunches his face. "I know, it was awful." A hand comes up to rub at his neck. "He played the *Crazy Ex Girlfriend* soundtrack on repeat while he gave me a lecture. "

Knox chuckles. "Oh, that's brutal."

"It was," Charlie's lips twitch into a half smile as he steps closer, lingering near the couch. "But I think... I probably deserved it."

Knox's breath catches as he watches Charlie hesitate. He is not sure whether or not he likes this new timid Charlie, but the vulnerability in his familiar eyes makes Knox's heart hammer in his chest.

"Come on, sit down," Knox says softly, motioning towards the couch. "Let's talk."

Charlie actually shuffles his feet as he comes around the couch, dropping himself on to it, close enough to knock his knee against Knox's. He tugs at the hem of his sweater, and it draws Knox's attention to it and -

Oh .

He's wearing *his* sweater. The old one, the one that used to be his. Red cashmere frayed at the edges, too big across Charlie's shoulders, with loose threads hanging from the cuffs.

Knox's heart is definitely not supposed to be beating as hard it currently does. "Look," he starts, "I – I don't know how to do this without overwhelming you, so maybe you should go first."

Charlie nods, tapping his fingers against his knee. "Right, okay," he

mumbles. “Right… I don’t -” a long, exasperated sigh comes through his lips, “- This is fucking ridiculous.”

“Talking about feelings sucks, huh?” Knox arches an eyebrow, a teasing smile ghosting on his lips.

“Big time,” Charlie manages a wry grin. “Like, whatever you’re thinking, double it.”

“And pass it to the next one?” Knox realizes it’s a lame attempt at levity as soon as the words leave his tongue.

Charlie gives him a deadpan look, before slowly shaking his head. “Why? Why are you such a huge loser?”

“Look, it’s how I’m coping, alright?”

Charlie’s gaze softens, something unreadable in his eyes. “It’s not on you to make this easy for me, Knox.”

“Right, I’m sorry,” Knox mutters. He scratches a dirty spot on the leather of their couch, his gaze momentarily dropping to it. “Can you – can you please stop calling me that?” He asks, his voice cracking halfway through the sentence.

“What?” Charlie sounds genuinely surprised, and Knox glances up at him.

“You know,” he says emphatically.

Charlie tilts his head, brow furrowing. “Stop calling you by your name?”

Knox drops his gaze back to the couch, jaw tight. “Yeah. Stop calling me Knox.”

“Is there something I should know?” Knox hears the amusement in Charlie’s voice and he bites his tongue. “Are you, like, coming out to me? Should I ask for your pronouns?”

“Char,” the nickname comes out whispered, but it makes Charlie’s breath catch. Knox chances another gaze to his face, but Charlie’s expression is still unreadable.

“Say it,” he says, after a beat, his voice a mixture of plea and challenge.

“Say what?”

“What should I call you if not by your name?” Charlie presses. Knox scratches against the leather again, holding his ground for a long, suffering second, before sighing.

“Oh, you’re evil,” he mutters through his teeth, finally lifting his eyes to look at Charlie. “Fine, fine, you twat, fine! Call me Knoxious, Knoxie, even fucking Romeo-wannabe, just –” Knox’s voice breaks, and he draws a deep breath. “- don't... don’t call me Knox. Please.”

Something flickers in Charlie’s expression, something raw and dark, and Knox’s next breath shutters in his throat. Charlie leans closer, his eyes dragging down Knox’s body, tongue darting out to lick at his lips. His voice drops, barely more than a whisper, and it makes the synapses in Knox’s brain frizzle, all of his muscles going taut. “I wanna kiss you so bad right now.”

Knox tries to swallow, but his throat is too thick, and his chest is too tight and there’s suddenly not enough air in the room. A harsh blush spreads from his chest to his neck, rapidly moving to his cheeks, and Knox clenches his hands at his sides lest he do something stupid like grab at the collar of that damn sweater and kiss Charlie stupid. His lips part, and his voice is shakier than he’d like, but he manages a weak, “Talk now, kiss later.”

The look on Charlie’s face twists, an intoxicating blend of warmth and mischief, and his eyes dance over Knox like he’s savoring every reaction. “Promise?”

Knox’s mouth goes completely dry as he stares at Charlie’s lips, so close yet so out of reach.

They need to talk first.

“Don’t push it,” he murmurs, but it’s more a plea than a warning.

Charlie’s mouth curves into a small, wicked grin, his eyes narrowing with a teasing glint. “So, bossy all of a sudden, aren’t you, Knoxious?”

Knox’s stomach flips, a noncommittal, but embarrassing sound escaping his throat. He has the sudden urge to reach forward and drag his nails down Charlie’s throat until he bleeds. Knox sucks in a breath, tries to steady himself. “You son of a bitch,” he whispers, but it’s barely an insult and more like a thinly veiled surrender.

Charlie laughs softly, then shits back, gaze serious again. “Alright, I'll behave. Let me start this with an apology-”

Knox shakes his head, attempting to regain some control over himself. “You don’t have to apologize.”

Charlie frowns. “But I do! You may have gone about it the absolutely wrong way, but...you *tried* talking to me. And when that didn’t work, you kissed me within an inch of my life.”

Knox’s mouth twitches. “It... it was a good kiss.”

Charlie laughs, shaking his head, the tension in his shoulders easing a bit. “Knox, I think it was my first kiss, ever.” His voice is soft, almost shy and Knox’s chest aches at the implication.

“Oh,” he breathes, and he feels himself leaning forward. His eyes fall to Charlie’s lips and he can almost feel it again, the taste of Charlie’s lips pressed against his own. The hunger, the want, *the need.* The closeness that didn’t feel nearly enough. It’s as if his whole body is screaming for him to close the distance, *get closer, get closer, get closer* . It takes herculean effort on his part to drag his eyes back up.

When he does, Charlie’s smirk is waiting for him, cocky and knowing, like he’s been expecting it.

“Talk now, kiss later, remember?” He taunts, and Knox wants to be annoyed, he really does, but Charlie’s voice feels like melted caramel, dripping over him, scalding his skin and all that Knox can think is that he wants more.

“Fuck you,” he mutters with zero bite in it.

Charlie’s grin widens, and he leans back, casually smug. “Yeah, I think I’m down for that.”

Knox’s breath hitches, and he feels his pulse thunder, heat blooming once more to his face. His heart is beating so erratically and loud that he’s certain Charlie can hear it. He should say something clever, something to break the tension, but all he can come up with is, “Is that how you plan to behave?!”

Charlie’s gaze again roams over him, catching on every tell Knox has failed to hide, and there’s that darkness again glinting in his eyes, the one that makes heat pool in Knox’s lower abdomen. “I’ve been avoiding you for weeks, I can’t help the flirting!”

“So, flirting with me comes naturally to you?” Knox demands, upset for some inexplicable reason, pulling back and staring at Charlie hard.

Charlie’s mouth snaps a couple of times, still searching for the words. “What do you think, Knoxie? I’ve only been doing it for the past six years!” He finally yells, then seems to realize the volume of his own voice, his eyes widening in self-reproach. “Shit, I shouldn’t be yelling at you. Neil is going to be disappointed.”

“Fuck Neil.” Knox spits back, and when Charlie shoots him an offended look, he raises a finger, jabbing it in his direction. “No, I got you talking this way, I’m not stopping now!” Knox snaps, pointing a finger at Charlie’s face.

Charlie gives him an incredulous look, his jaw going a little slack. He lets out a sharp laugh, one that’s more frustration than humor. “You wanna do this thing screaming?”

Knox’s pulse races, a twisted thrill cutting through his anger. “It’s the only thing that seems to be working with you…” His voice dips, and his breath catches slightly at the sight of Charlie’s flushed face, his chest rising and falling, looking incredibly soft in that damn red sweater.

Charlie’s eyes narrow, a bitter smirk tugging at his mouth. “Oh, that’s so messed up.”

“Let’s thank your parents for that,” Knox deadpans, arms crossing over his chest.

Charlie’s face tightens. “Like your parents are any better,” he shoots back, folding his own arms, mirroring Knox in a way that only frustrates him more.

“They’re not - they’re god awful,” Knox huffs, feeling his throat swell as he forces the words out, “but at least they taught me how to express my feelings!” Knox presses, nostrils flaring as he glares at Charlie, daring him to respond.

Charlie’s eyes harden, and his voice cuts through the air, sharp as a whip. “You mean they taught you how to render people useless by weaponizing your feelings! Because that what you’ve gone around doing!”

Knox blinks, the accusation hitting him like a slap, momentarily too

stunned to immediately fire back. “I didn’t mean -” he starts, voice faltering.

“I know you didn’t mean to,” Charlie interrupts, voice growing slightly more gentle but still cold, and it almost hurts more. “And that’s the worst part. I know you were probably only trying to be yourself, but that was...” his sentence trails off and Knox feels it in his gut.

The words are hanging in the air between them.

The words that have been haunting him for years.

Knox drops his arms, something sinking inside him. “Too much?” He guesses, voice void of emotion.

Charlie’s expression shifts, and he looks at Knox like he’s just realizing something painful. “What?” He frowns. “Where did that come from?”

Knox shrugs stiffly, feeling his pulse pound in his ears. “From listening to you talk?” He is still glaring, but it’s not anger. It’s something darker, something secret, buried deep within him. He hates that Charlie gets to see it now.

“Too much...” Charlie’s sentence trails again, his words careful. “No, no that’s not the problem.” His frown deepens, as he braces his forearms on his knees, eyes locking on Knox’s. “Expecting everyone to accept your way of expression right off the bat? That’s the messed up part – not you being ‘too much’. What does that even mean, Knox?”

Knox can’t help but stare at Charlie’s mouth as he speaks, how his lips curve around his words, how his tongue flicks over his teeth. He lets a sigh, attempts to refocus to the conversation at hand. “It means I bulldoze over other people’s feelings. That my feelings are too loud, too intense... too much.”

Charlie’s expression softens in disbelief, and he shakes his head. “Well, that’s a load of crap.”

Knox blinks, momentarily thrown, but then he laughs a little, bitterly. “It’s actually the reason I’ve been dumped by like... all of my exes.” The confession slips out, and he immediately feels raw and exposed.

Charlies eyes widen. “All of them?” He questions, and then his face turns horrified, “Even that tool Ian?”

“Especially Ian.”

Charlie stares at him. “Fucking fuck – what?” He’s so close now that Knox feels his breath, warm against his skin, and he can’t stop his heart from flattering at the proximity, even if they’re still going for each other’s throat.

“Why are you so surprised?” Knox murmurs. “You just said the same thing, just went around and changed the words up a bit.”

Charlie’s jaw clenches, his hands grip the edge of his seat as he leans in, his face so close it makes Knox’s skin burn. “No, no it’s not the same thing! I… I’m probably not explaining this right.”

Knox huffs out a breath, kinking an eyebrow almost challengingly. “You’re an English major, I thought you are supposed to be with using the language.”

“I’m not Todd,” Charlie says, the corner of his mouth twitching despite his irritation.

Knox lets out a low laugh. “That’s true.”

Charlie sighs, shifting a bit closer, and the intensity in his eyes makes Knox’s pulse skip. “Okay, let me try this again; the way you love? The intensity? Going in head first, eyes shut? Obsessed with it, drives me crazy, Knoxious.” His voice dips, and Knox’s chest tightens. “Makes me want to do unspeakable things to you.”

Knox is barely breathing, his throat tight as Charlie continues, his voice rough but quiet, like it’s painful for him to say. “But the way you go about it - the love bombing? Not really a fan.”

Knox blinks, swallowing hard. “I -” he lets out a shaky breath, voice barely above a whisper. “I wasn’t aware I was doing that. Meeks – Meeks told me about it.”

Charlie’s mouth quirks slightly. “Meeks has been my shrink for the past twenty years.”

Knox snorts. “You’re twenty-one, Char.”

Charlie rolls his eyes, looking up at the ceiling “He raised me, okay? Anyway,” he says, his tone shifting back to serious, “love bombing is… triggering, for me. It messes with my head.”

Knox's face falls. "God, Charlie I...I'm so sorry."

Charlie's hand hovers close to his own, and Knox aches with the urge to reach out, to touch him somehow, anything to ease the tension. But he doesn't move, forcing himself to meet Charlie's gaze instead. "You didn't know," Charlie says, his voice soft, but his eyes are searching, almost like he's testing him.

Knox's voice is a whisper, thick with guilt. "But I should've noticed. I should've seen it made you uncomfortable, I could've... run things by you instead of doing whatever felt right in the moment." He messes a hand through his hair, tugging at the ends.

Charlie's expression softens, and the corners of his mouth twitch. "Yeah," he murmurs, shifting closer to him on the couch, knees knocking together again. "I think that would've helped."

Knox's stomach performs an Olympic medal worthy somersault. "I'm so sorry, Charlie. I was... It was so reckless of me. And to think that I made you go through all of that for something fake..." Knox's voice hitches, and he reaches out impulsively, fingers brushing against the fabric of Charlie's jeans. "I - I didn't realize what I was putting you through."

"Was it fake?" Charlie's voice is small, vulnerable. His gaze is steady, though, as he searches Knox's face for answers. "My reaction was so visceral is because it wasn't fake for me, Knox. I know it started out that way, but my feelings... I've been running from them for so long, that I've run myself into a corner."

Knox's pulse jumps, thundering in his ears. It's one thing to hear Meeks claim it, and another thing for Charlie to speak the words himself. "No," he says, and he sees the flash of hurt in Charlie's eyes. "Wait, no, I mean yeah, it wasn't fake!" He rushes, cheeks turning warm, as he holds Charlie's gaze. "It's not fake. This probably isn't the right time to say this, but I think I've been in love with you for...well, remember that Christmas party last year?"

Charlie lets out a scoffing laugh, clearly caught off guard. "You mean when you tried to jump me?"

Knox rolls his eyes, tentatively resting his fingers on Charlie's knee. "Yeah, and I would've if you weren't so damn skittish."

Charlie narrows his eyes, though his lips wobble like he's trying not to smile. "You were drunk, Knoxious! You had just gotten out of a semi-

serious relationship. What was I supposed to think?"

Knox rolls his eyes. "I wasn't heartbroken over Leo, Char. I was heartbroken because my mom called to tell me she was marrying Robert. That whole mess had nothing to do with Leo."

Charlie blinks, confused. "You - wait, what?"

Knox fixes him with an amused look. "You thought I got that drunk over Leo? Be for so real now, Char."

Charlie stares, brow furrowing as he processes Knox's words. "You were gashing about him for literal months! You cried when he asked you out!"

Knox laughs, breathless and soft. "I cry when anyone asks me out; it's my go to move!"

Charlie draws a breath, pinches the bridge of his nose. "You claimed you were in love after a week of dating him!" He exclaims, and Knox chuckles.

"Oh, and that's so out of character for me." Knox can't help the smirk that twists the corners of his lips, his fingers lightly tracing patterns on Charlie's knee.

"Yeah, but how was I supposed to know you weren't actually heartbroken over your split?"

Knox takes a deep breath, willing his pulse to calm down, as he worries his bottom lip. "Okay, remember that time your dad came to visit last year? You went out for dinner at that fancy restaurant across town. He ordered lobster despite you being allergic to sea food? Remember how you had a fight, and you stormed off and you called me to come pick you up?" Knox leans closer, his gaze intense, heart pounding. "I was supposed to spend the night with Leo, *my first time in his place* , and I just... up and left to come get you."

Charlie's eyes widen, and his lips part as the realization dawns on him. "I thought... I thought you were just being a good friend."

Knox's gaze softens, and his fingers tremble as he moves them more firmly higher on Charlie's leg. "So did I, but Leo was... upset. Said he could never trust me around you again."

"Always gave me the stink eye, that bastard."

“He was right though. Maybe I wasn’t ready to admit it, but I am now.” Knox’s voice softens, like he’s baring a secret. “I think... I think I loved you all this time. Well, not love you, you know I love you, but I think I was in love with you.”

Charlie’s breath catches, and he gives a soft, disbelieving laugh. “Since last year?”

Knox bites the inside of his cheek, squeezing Charlie’s leg, as if to convince himself that he is real, that this is happening. “Since... maybe longer than that?” There’s a questioning lilt in his voice, because Charlie is just staring at him, face expressionless. “Char?” He prompts, when the silence stretches, his stomach twisting painfully inside his body.

Charlie’s cheeks flush, and a nervous chuckle breaks past his lips. “Fucking Christ, Knox!” He lets out a shaky breath, leaning forward to pin in Knox's eyes. “You’re telling me we could’ve been together for years?”

Knox smiles, a bittersweet edge to it, fingers tightening their hold on Charlie. “I... I’m sorry?”

Charlie rolls his eyes, his voice a mix of frustration and affection. “You should be!” He laughs, glancing away, but when his eyes return to Knox, there’s something sharp there. “Wait, were you in love with me while dating Ian?”

Knox groans, softly, his head falling forward in the little space between them. “You really didn’t like Ian, did you?”

Charlie’s hand finds its way to the back of Knox’s neck, gentle and grounding. Knox’s skin buzzes underneath the touch, a jolt rushing through him, when Charlie brushes his thumb over the base of his neck. “He pushed you too much.”

“He wasn’t that bad.” Knox tries to defend for reasons unknown, and Charlie narrows his eyes.

“Dude made you go bungee jumping; you were shaking for weeks afterwards,” he says, his tone biting. “Besides, he kept flirting with literally everyone while you were together.”

“Right...” Knox sighs. “I don’t know,” he mutters, returning to Charlie’s initial question. “I think... I think I might have been in love with you from the start,” he murmurs, voice almost tender.

Charlie drags his hand from the back of his neck, to his face, palm cupping the side of Knox's face. His fingers are a little rough, but they're warm, and Knox melts a little when Charlie's thumb rubs under his eye. "From the start?"

"What did you expect?" Knox asks, a gentle smile playing on his lips. "First time you saw me you kept looking at me like I was chocolate and you had spent your childhood sugar free! That would do in men with a will twice stronger than mine."

Charlie's face blooms with color, his grip on Knox's face turning slightly firmer. "I thought I was the English major," he teases, tugging Knox's face closer.

Knox lets a harsh breath. "You just confirmed you've been in love with me for years," he whispers, chuckling lowly. "I could write a fucking sonnet right now."

Charlie lets out a breath he seems to have been holding, the corner of his mouth curling into the familiar smirk Knox has seen a thousand times – but there's a darker edge this time, specifically devoted to him. "Good," he whispers, leaning in close. "So... talk now, kiss later?"

Knox's pulse races as he meets Charlie's eyes, steady and sure. "Nah," he breathes, a grin breaking free. "I think we're done talking."

Chapter End Notes

Lyrical and absolutely not strict translation of Latin;

Nunc scio, quid sit Amor ; Now I know what love is.
Sine te non potero vivere ; I can't live without you.
A te principium, tibi desinam. ; I begin and end with you.

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